

**PEASANT MOBILISATION IN CONTEMPORARY ASSAM: A  
STUDY OF KRISHAK MUKTI SANGRAM SAMITI**

Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the award of degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled, **‘Peasant Mobilisation in Contemporary Assam: A Study of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti’**, submitted by Ms. **Adrita Gogoi** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, has not been previously submitted in part or in full for any other degree of this university or any other university/institution.

We recommend this thesis be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Ph.D.

  
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*In 2016, 11,370 peasants died of suicide in India*

*In 2018 it was 10,349,*

*In 2019 it was 42,480,*

*And the number continues...*

*To them,*

*For all I can do*

*Is to write for a cause*



## Acknowledgement

*I am thankful to many people who have been a constant support to me. The thesis was mostly written at the time of the pandemic, when it hit down many lives, bringing the world to a gloom. The mental agony and the writing at such turbulent times was indeed a challenge. I thought deregistering from PHD, will lag me behind, but the constant support have let me submit my thesis on time.*

*I am forever indebted and grateful to my Ph.D supervisor, Professor Anupama Roy, whose critical engagement and comments on my chapters and drafts helped shape the thesis. The engagement over the years and Professor Roy's interest in my work motivated me a lot. I got that healthy space to carry my research work under Roy's guidance. Having entered into research as a raw student in 2014, my engagement with Professor Roy over these years helped me gain confidence and I have learnt a lot. I thank Professor Roy for her patient guidance and advice in all these years.*

*I am also thankful to the faculties of Centre for Political Studies. I will miss the classes and the corridors of CPS all throughout my life. Now after completing a decade in the centre, I am really heavy with words.*

*I am thankful to Hiren Gohain sir, for providing valuable information and patiently addressing my questions.*

*The B.R Ambedkar library of JNU, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development library and the District Library of Kamrup Metro, Guwahati has provided me with the materials. I am grateful for the online available resources at SCIHUB and ZLIBRARY- for providing free materials, cutting barriers and making research accessible to all.*

*I am thankful to the office workers, leaders and members of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti, Nari Mukti Sangram Samiti, Sah Shromik Mukti Sangram Samiti, Raijor Dal and Akhil Gogoi for their cooperation and providing me with the primary materials for my work. Bhasco De Saikia has provided me with the materials I needed. The*

*list is too long to mention the names here. I am thankful to the people of Doyang and Tengani for their cooperation.*

*Lastly I am thankful to my family. I do not have words enough to express their contribution here.*

*Adrita Gogoi*

ADRITA GOGOI

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## **Abbreviations**

AASU	All Assam Students Union
AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
AJYCP	Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad
AIUDF	All India United Democratic Front
ASS	Assam Sahitya Sabha
ASP	Assistant Superintendent of Police
AJP	Assam Jatiya Parishad
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BTUSS	Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti
CAB	Citizenship Amendment Bill
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CBI	Central Bureau of Investigation
CRPF	Central Reserve Police Force
DC	District Commissioner
DMSS	Doyang Mukti Sangram Samiti
DSP	Deputy Superintendent of Police
GMCH	Gauhati Medical College and Hospital

KMSS	Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti
LPG	Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation
NEEPCO	North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited
NHAI	National Highway Authority of India
NIA	National Investigation Agency
NMSS	Nari Mukti Sangram Samiti
NRC	National Register of Citizens
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NSA	National Security Act
NSCN	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
MSP	Minimum Support Price
PDS	Public Distribution System
RD	Raijor Dal
RTI	Right to Information
SP	Superintendent of Police
SMSS	Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti
SSMSS	Sah Shromik Mukti Sangram Samiti
TET	Teacher Eligibility Test
UAPA	Unlawful Activities Prevention Act

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## INTRODUCTION

Peasant mobilisation and resistance has been a defining aspect of developing countries whose large chunk of the population is directly engaged in agricultural and allied activities. The peasantry, the primary producer of the basic needs has been a struggling lot throughout history because of continuous exploitation. Though a producer, the peasantry does not own the means of production that generates the surplus,<sup>1</sup> and is placed at the bottom of the hierarchical economic structure of the society. Karl Marx depicts the third stage in his theory of historical materialism, 'the feudal stage' as a stage of continuous exploitation of the feudal serfs by the feudal lords. This continuous form of domination and exploitation has led the peasantry mobilise and resist against the forces of which it has been a victim. Peasant protests in India against exploitation have come a long way since the days of independence struggle. In pre-colonial period, it has been argued by Harbans Mukhia that Indian society was devoid of feudalism, and was characterized by self-dependence or peasant-free production.<sup>2</sup> Discontent and dissatisfaction among the peasants since colonial days is not a new feature of the peasantry in India. Earlier forms of peasant protests in India were against feudal Zamindari, Ryotwari or the Mahalwari system, revolutionary in character. In colonial India, the resistance and struggle was against landlords and the revenue system. Although the post colonial Indian state brought in major agrarian reforms like abolition of intermediaries, abolishing land tenure, consolidation of land holdings, ceiling on land etc, it failed to bring any significant changes in the life of the peasantry whose economic and social condition continue to remain the same. There have been many revolutionary peasant upsurges in independent India like the Telangana movement (1946-1951); Tebhaga movement (1946-1949), the Naxalbari movement (1967) and many more. These movements and struggle of the peasants continued to surface in Indian politics from time to time.

The colonial peasant struggle, if one scans the history was the active participation of peasants in the nationalist movement. Whereas the colonial discourse of peasant struggle was

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<sup>1</sup> This argument was forwarded by Eric Wolf and has been further explained in section 1.1 of Chapter 1. Wolf. E. R. (1966). *Peasants*. London: Princeton-Hall International Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Mukhia, H. (1981). Was there feudalism in Indian history?. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 8 (3), 273-310.

imperialist exploitation, an issue big enough to turn the popular peasant sentiment against colonialism, the post colonial era saw the large peasant movements against the Indian state. Both the struggles were largely against economic exploitation by the state through various ill taxation and landed laws. The post-independence peasant organisations which have mostly been affiliated with the parliamentary left parties like the All India Kishan Sabha,<sup>3</sup> and the struggles under Praja Socialist Party and the Socialist Party<sup>4</sup> were all struggling against the same issues. So peasant mobilisation so far has been specific in its area of operation. The change of state politics and the advent of liberal policies of globalisation, peasants have come to acquire a different character of mobilisation with due course. The discourse of peasant politics is no longer the same.

The liberalisation of the economy in 1991 and the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) have resulted in the opening up of the market for trade and commerce which has overall changed the face of the Indian economy and the Indian state. Major policy shifts has brought many changes in the agrarian society, the Indian state being the precursor of it. The peasant's struggle too changed from traditional feudal atrocities, as peasants have come to involve more in market production and increased competition and has been quoted by scholars as having entered into a 'new phase' of movement.<sup>5</sup> The trends of a neo-liberal state indicates different pattern of peasant economy and survival. Gail Omvedt says that the 'new peasant movement' in India has its 'own concepts of exploitation and struggle' against the Indian state in 'capitalistically developed rural areas' of the country.<sup>6</sup> The peasant's protests and struggle in a neo-liberal state and globalizing era has assumed a new tendency which is not only directed against dependency and exploitation, but a growing number of insecurities which is not primarily economic in character.

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<sup>3</sup> The All India Kishan Sabha was under the influence of Communist Party of India.

<sup>4</sup> This has largely been discussed by Uday Mehta where these organisations emerged out of discontent with the state's failure to solve larger agrarian crisis. See Mehta, U. (1979). *Peasant Movement in India*. In Desai, A. R. Peasant Struggles in India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 743-750.

<sup>5</sup> Sudha Pai traces the agrarian movements in 3 distinct categories, the last category being the post 1991 liberalisation and the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) from where the farmer's movement have entered a new phase. See Pai, S. (2010). Farmers' Movements. In Jayal & Mehta, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (pp.391-408). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Omvedt, G. (1988). The "New Peasant Movement" in India. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 20 (2), 14-23.

Globalisation has created new standards and norms for the world to be integrated into one global village, whereby posing threats to the ‘village’ life, more specifically the rural. The attempts to capitalizing the peasant economy have included corporatism, thereby trying to make agriculture into an industry.<sup>7</sup> Globalisation of the economy has serious implications on the agricultural sector- ‘the freeing of controls, the removal of subsidies and price support, dependence on market forces’ has led to a slowdown of agricultural growth. The withdrawal of the Indian state from the agrarian sector has caused more distress among the rural poor and whose livelihood is dependent on agriculture and allied activities. The forces of globalisation are expanding where rapid industrialization, excessive migration, capitalism, environmental degradation are some of the repercussions which are adversely affecting the lives of the peasants in many different ways. Whilst one can never do away with it, many different forms of protests and resistance have come to surface recently. An interesting part of the unrest in the neoliberal era is that all sections of the rural-agrarian are equally involved.<sup>8</sup> While the economic condition of the peasantry is still the same, the important point of analysis is to study the peasantry in the contemporary context. Ghanshyam Shah has observed that peasant unrest has undergone change since the green revolution accompanied with capitalist agriculture, the penetration of the market economy and globalisation, although there still exists the struggle for land rights.<sup>9</sup> Shah illustrates that peasants now demand ‘remunerative prices of their produce, concessions and subsidies in the prices of agricultural inputs, electricity charges, irrigation charges and betterment levies’.<sup>10</sup> In November 2018, lakhs of peasants from across the country gathered in the capital city, New Delhi and marched towards the Indian parliament pressing for their demands of fair/remunerative prices of their produce and debt relief.<sup>11</sup> Peasant suicides are an emerging reality in India, with over 3 lakhs

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Pai, S. (2010). Farmers’ Movements. In Jayal & Mehta, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (pp.391-408). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Suthar has mentioned that the contemporary farmers’ movement in India is the rural-agrarian crisis where people from all the segments- the women, the landless, small shopkeepers are involved. Suthar, S. (2018). Contemporary Farmers’ Protests and the ‘New Rural-Agrarian’ in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, LIII (26 & 27), 17-23.

<sup>9</sup> Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 53-54.

<sup>10</sup> Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 53-54.

<sup>11</sup> PTI. (2018, November 29). *Tamil Nadu Farmers arrive in Delhi with skulls, threaten naked march if stopped from going to Parliament*. The New Indian Express, retrieved from <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2018/nov/29/tamil-nadu-farmers-arrive-with-skulls-threaten-naked-march-if-stopped-from-going-to-parliament-1904939.html>.

of peasants committing suicides in the last 15 years.<sup>12</sup> The growing peasant distress assumed so much potency in Indian politics also that in the state assembly elections of Madhya Pradesh in 2018, the Indian National Congress promised to waive the farm loans in a bid to provide relief to the peasants in its election manifesto, which later became a strong ground for the party to win the majority. The recent peasant unrest therefore is complex which is not only related to land issues but is accompanied by a host of several others issues.

On September 2020, the Indian parliament passed three farm/agricultural bills which created lots of hue and cry among the peasants of the country. The three bills viz. the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act have directly facilitated barrier free trade through market competition, aiming to protect and empower farmers 'to engage with agri-business firms, processors, wholesalers, exporters or large retailers for farm services and sale of future farming produce at a mutually agreed remunerative price framework in a fair and transparent manner'.<sup>13</sup> The neo-liberal approach of the state in facilitating larger freedom to the farmers for their sale and purchase of their produce has laid the ground for a *laissez faire* economy in the agricultural sector, thereby directing the observance of 'self-help' for the farmers. The peasants in many parts of the country participated in nation-wide protests opposing the call of the Indian state saying the bills will increase price rise and with the absence of Minimum Support Price (MSP) and the free-hand given to private corporate houses can lead to their exploitation. This move by the peasants was against the capitalist nature of the Indian state which opens a lot of questions on the status of the peasantry in a neo-liberal world driven by market agendas. Driven by insecurity over increased competition with no guarantee or protection, peasants have faced tremendous challenges in the neo-liberal era. Peasant mobilisation more so in the recent times have largely been motivated because of many insecurities arising out of price rise, inadequate price of their produce and such other

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<sup>12</sup> PTI. (2018, November 29). *Tamil Nadu Farmers arrive in Delhi with skulls, threaten naked march if stopped from going to Parliament*. The New Indian Express, retrieved from <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2018/nov/29/tamil-nadu-farmers-arrive-with-skulls-threaten-naked-march-if-stopped-from-going-to-parliament-1904939.html>.

<sup>13</sup> *The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020* (No 20 of 2020), India, dated 24<sup>th</sup> September 2020.



economic uncertainties. The withdrawing of the state regulation and leaving the peasants at the mercy of the free market have resulted in massive movement by the peasants of India whose demand is to repeal the contentious agricultural laws. The peasants, who are skeptical of the future of the agricultural laws, do not trust the big corporations and the private investors and instead have been demanding the guarantee and security of their produce from the state. The demand for protection by the protesting peasants is a significant point of analysis in the era of globalisation. What are the insecurities the peasantry faces in the contemporary world? And how do we understand the subsequent peasant protests and mobilisation in the contemporary context as distinct from the traditional ones? These are some of the larger questions that one needs to ponder on peasant's mobilisation in a neo-liberal world.

Coming to the specific context of the thesis; Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), a contemporary peasant organisation based in Assam formed in 2005, is championing the rights of the peasants in Assam who are affected by the many developments of the state thereby directly working for those who are easily exploited and are victims of many social, economic and political issues of the region. It is largely a pan Assam organisation operating at ground level with issues like land rights for forests dwellers, granting pattas to landless peasants and other issues of the peasantry. The operation of the organisation goes much beyond land rights of the peasants to agitations on patently non-exotic issues such as Public Distribution System thefts, construction of big dams in fragile seismic territories, non-implementation of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, corruption in various state departments through effective use of the Rights to Information Act etc. Its organisation has a broader reach to the people of Assam by encompassing issues of grave importance as its agenda in meeting peasant demands and security of their livelihood. KMSS in Assam of late has been expanding its area of operation to include every single local worries and issues of Assam, emerging as a powerful resistance group and a regional organisation of Assam. KMSS which was formed on 2005, in an era of the expanding forces of globalisation aims to resist the same. Infact one of the greater objectives as has been enlisted is to resist the forces of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation which have recently evolved as the biggest challenge for the peasants and the workers. Thus, KMSS operates not only as a peasant organisation but also has larger objectives at hand.

The politics and affairs of KMSS are diverse and are becoming popular not only in Assam but also in the country. The peasant organisation has mobilised mass movements against big dams, its anti-corruption crusade, massive protests for land rights as well its regular participation on matters of electoral campaigns in Assam speaks a lot about the dynamicity of the organisation. The most recent development of KMSS is that it has launched its own political party- Rajior Dal (People's party) in a bid to contest the Assam state assembly elections of 2021, thus taking the parliamentary route of addressing the public affairs. While taking into note the divergent issues that KMSS has initiated, it is indeed a somewhat different and difficult task to bring all these in a singular discussion, more importantly to understand it from the purview of a peasant organisation. The study of a peasant organisation in the contemporary era of globalisation, thus will not limit itself to understand KMSS as a peasant organisation concerned solely for the issues of the peasantry but to comprehend the whole phenomenon and plethora of its politics under the umbrella of a 'peasant organisation'. If one tries to understand a peasant organisation only within the boundaries of peasantry and related issues, then it will limit the possibilities of understanding the larger political, cultural and social environment under which a peasant organisation works. It is important to contextualize KMSS in the cultural, political and social setting of Assam and not just attempt to understand from the established political meaning of a peasant organisation as related to only peasant issues.

The thesis will therefore address multiple issues that KMSS has engaged with or led movements for. The range of issues will vary. Having said that, it is imperative for us to understand the organisation in both its manifestations and understand its objectives and work in Assam. The thesis is an attempt to understand and analyze the peasant politics of KMSS in the light of the above discussion, more importantly in the era of globalisation and the contemporary liberal and market driven world.

### **Research questions**

The thesis engages with the primary question

- How do we understand the contemporary peasant struggle and its subsequent mobilisation under KMSS in Assam?

It then proceeds to answer several important questions

1. Why and how KMSS emerged as a potent peasant organisation in Assam?
2. How do we comprehend the nature of resistance of KMSS in contemporary Assam?  
How and in what ways the organisation is able to assert their rights and identity of the peasantry through their struggle?
3. How do we comprehend the trends of regionalism of KMSS?
4. Does KMSS been able to form new forms of legitimacy and struggle in Assam?

### **Hypothesis**

The study begins with the hypothesis-

- The peasant organisation, KMSS has been successful in building a pan organisation in Assam cutting across class. This is essential in building up a mass organisation in Assam to resist the many forces of which it has been a victim.
- Peasant issues in Assam has centered on the struggle for land rights and against the feudal land laws of the state. KMSS has cut across these traditional peasant issues in order to emerge itself as a pan regional organisation in Assam.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To understand the discourse and varied forms of peasant politics and struggle in contemporary Assam and to locate the discourse in the present social, economic and political issues of Assam. This will help to understand and locate peasant struggle and mobilisation in the region.
2. To understand the nature of growth of KMSS in Assam in terms of its history of formation, ideology, power base, aims and objectives, development, leadership pattern, organisational principles and so on. This will be the preliminary understanding of the rise of KMSS as a peasant organisation in Assam.
3. To understand the nature/pattern of politics of KMSS and its structure of functioning in mobilising and galvanizing masses. The pattern of politics will help understand the modes of resistance and resentment of KMSS and to have a broad understanding of the political practice which KMSS adopts.

4. To understand KMSS's operation in Assam as a distinct regional organisation and identify the processes where it has established itself as a major regional organisation in Assam.
5. To locate 'peasant identities' in the course of understanding their politics. An important aspect in understanding the peasantry of KMSS is to bring out the peasant voices, opinions and narratives which will help understand the dynamics of the peasantry, their concerns and demands and its relationship with KMSS.

The objectives will reflect an understanding of contemporary peasant mobilisation in Assam led by KMSS and the impact of the neoliberal state on the peasant community of Assam.

### **Scope of the study**

Peasant mobilisation and agrarian movements has been an important aspect of human history, which emerged as a response to the feudal law and atrocities inflicted since centuries. Most of the peasant studies have been squarely addressing this phenomenon in varied manifestations- primarily from a sociological point of view. The composition, class/caste structure, peasant consciousness, relationship with the ownership of land, hierarchy was some of the aspects covered in agrarian studies. The earlier peasant studies studied the relationship of the peasantry with the landed gentry and the landlords. The thesis will look at the political character of peasant mobilisation as launched by KMSS directed against the capitalist state and the struggle that lies within. It will be a study of the politics of the masses, their demands, aspirations, their modus operandi in asserting their demands. As mentioned, KMSS has been organizing itself against the state in a neoliberal world. Therefore this study attempt to understand the nature of the capitalist state, its acts, policies, programmes and its subsequent affects on the peasantry. The study will help understand contemporary peasant struggles in the era of globalisation and present an understanding of peasant struggle different from the traditional peasant studies. Contemporary peasant movement has dealt with green revolution, radical peasant upsurge and forest rights of the last century. Agrarian studies in Assam for that matter has been dealt by historians and economists delegated to the colonial period only. The absence of the study of peasant mobilisation in contemporary era not only represents the dearth of literature but also the existence of a strong peasant

resistance until recently. The study is specific to peasant politics of Assam by an independent peasant organisation, KMSS. It will not only limit itself to understanding the socio political aspects of peasant mobilisation but also the crucial relationship with the state and vice versa.

## **Chapterisation**

### Chapter One- **Understanding the Peasantry**

The first chapter of the thesis sets the theoretical framework of understanding peasant mobilisation in Assam. The chapter will primarily involve a deeper analysis of understanding the trait of 'peasant struggle and mobilisation' by engaging with the various debates on the nature of peasant movements and politics and the relevant frameworks to study them. It will be an attempt to set the background of understanding the peasantry and peasant politics while taking into account different opinions on the subject.

How do we understand peasant mobilisation in Assam in its history, society, polity and economy? Taking the question into account, the chapter will make an attempt to develop a framework for understanding the nature and emergence of peasant politics in Assam, and the way to understand the subject taking into account the many factors which has shaped the discourse. The historical and social analysis of peasant struggle in Assam is necessary to comprehend and situate the discourse of peasant struggle and mobilisation in Assam. The chapter will be more of a theoretical understanding of peasant mobilisation and to understand the peasantry in all its historical, social and material contexts. The relevant theories to address peasant mobilisation will be analyzed to understand the discourse in Assam.

### Chapter Two- **The Growth of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti in Assam**

The chapter gives an account of the rise and growth of KMSS in Assam. It attempts to trace and understand the birth of KMSS as a peasant organisation in Assam. It presents a detailed analysis of the development of KMSS since its establishment in 2005. With the rise of Krishak Mukti Samiti, an understanding of the organisation in terms of its organisational framework is also important which is done in the chapter.

The chapter seeks to address the following questions-

1. How KMSS came into being?
2. How do we understand and locate the organisation's functions, agendas, rules and principles?
3. What have been the significant stages of its development since 2005 in Assam? How do we comprehend this?

These questions will provide a broad base of understanding the peasant organisation's growth over the years. It will help locate the specific turn of events in the history of KMSS. Overall, the chapter provides a vivid understanding of how and why KMSS emerged as a potential peasant organisation in Assam, an analytical study of its development and growth. The chapter sets the base for an overall understanding of how KMSS became a popular peasant organisation in Assam.

### Chapter Three- **Processes of Mobilisation and Radicalization: Trends of Peasant Politics I**

The third chapter then proceeds to give a thorough analysis of the modus operandi of KMSS, the political methods adopted by the organisation to resist, mobilise, protest, dissent and alternative forms of struggle. These methods will explore the nature of KMSS in terms of its operationality which largely determines its pattern of mobilisation. The definite practices of KMSS in its struggle will give an account of discourse of KMSS. The chapter seeks to answer-

- How do we comprehend the nature of its struggle through the political methods adopted by the KMSS?

Basically, the chapter will bring out the various consistencies and inconsistencies that lie in the course of the struggle. While attempting to explain the nature of the political methods and the course of its resistance, the chapter attempts to bring into focus the approach of the state towards the dissenting group of KMSS.

### Chapter Four: **The National question of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti: Trends of Peasant Politics II**

Understanding the politics of KMSS will help undergo a deeper analysis of how regional politics is shaped in Assam by the peasant organisation. This chapter further presents peasant politics from another angle, different from the political methods adopted by the peasant organisation. It seeks to understand the peasant politics from its specific engagement into the issues of the Assam and the distinct articulation of Assam and the Assamese over the years. This gives a distinct regionalist image to KMSS, its politics centered on issues pivotal to the region as a whole. Taking this into account the chapter seeks to address the following questions

1. How do we identify and understand the nationalist struggle of KMSS in its politics?
2. How KMSS has emerged itself as a significant organisation in Assam partly by a distinctive articulation of the Assamese and Assam over the years?

Chapter Five: **Questions of Identity: Peasants in the emerging political scenario of Assam**

The final chapter is a narrative on the part of the peasants themselves, who have been affected by the repercussion of a neo-liberal and a capitalist state. The chapter will bring to light the actual dynamics of the peasantry from the fields, their concerns and demands bringing KMSS into an assessment of their struggle over the years. The chapter also attempts to bring into forefront the leadership pattern of KMSS. For the sake of clarity the chapter draws a line of distinction among the participants of the rallies and protest gatherings of KMSS and the supporters or members of the organisation. So the analysis will be drawn from these two set of people. The chapter attempts to bring out the heterogeneous peasant community which has varied demands and assertions. It proceeds with the following questions in mind-

1. How do we evaluate the progress and struggle of KMSS in mobilizing the peasantry of Assam?
2. How far the peasantry is aligned with the struggle, aims and operations of KMSS?

These questions hopes to bring the peasant assertions and identity into forefront taking into account the participants of the KMSS.

## **Conclusion**

The concluding section of the thesis will be a critical evaluation and an assessment of KMSS based on its politics and affairs over the years. The concluding section will set forth the anomalies of KMSS and puts into question its political practice which is largely controversial. Also, the concluding chapter will put forward the underlying arguments of the thesis and the main points of analysis. It will also try to figure the future politics of KMSS, its path, the problems which lie beyond in its journey of peasant struggle in the era of globalisation.

## **Methodology of the study**

The research consists of not only analyzing the available sources to understand the peasant mobilisation but also an attempt to bring out the voices and narratives of the peasantry. With such objectives the method adopted for the thesis has been carried out in distinctive phases.

### **Phase I of fieldwork**

The first phase was official work which involved collecting all the important official documents of KMSS and interviewing the official members to have a blueprint of the operation of the organisation. Before writing the thesis, I ran some errands to the central office of KMSS in Guwahati to collect important and related documents in the year 2016 and 2017. This was the period when I was preparing the synopsis of the thesis. The materials which I collected and extensively used in my research are the constitution, press releases/reports, press meets, memorandums, statements, briefs, posters, pamphlets and such other documents of KMSS. The press reports and memorandums have been an important source to get the timely engagements of KMSS since 2005. It has been useful to understand the organisation in terms of its operation and to analyze the course of its journey. Apart from the above sources of data of KMSS, I used similar collected materials of Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti, Nari Mukti Sangram Samiti and Sah Shromik Mukti Sangram Samiti, the student, women and tea garden workers wings of KMSS. The constitution and other timely press releases of these three factions of KMSS have also been engaged with. Later the



constitution and important depositions of Raijor Dal, the political party of KMSS was also collected and used in my research for analysis.

Apart from the official reports and documents collected from the office of KMSS the press reports of some of the leading newspaper dailies and TV channels are used to analyze the progress and operation of the organisation. There has been a rigorous study of all of them and I have tried my best not to miss a single report or an article on KMSS reported by the media. Since it is a contemporary organisation, a large part of the reports are available on the internet and social media. The facebook pages of the organisation and its factions are routinely followed. Because of the contemporariness, the exercise of keeping a track of all the reports has continued till the day the thesis was finalized.

The speeches and writings of the leaders of KMSS have also been an important source of data. Especially the writings of Akhil Gogoi, the prime leader and the General Secretary of the organisation have been extremely beneficial. Gogoi's writings have not only been used a source of reading but as a hermeneutical exercise to understand the leadership traits and the operations, ideology of KMSS and has been extensively quoted in the thesis.

The second part of the official work included the personal interviews of the leaders of KMSS, its office bearers, leaders of its student's wing- Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti, its women's wing- Nari Mukti Sangram Samiti and its tea garden worker's wing- Sah Shromik Mukti Sangram Samiti has been adopted as a tool. Apart from personal interviews, the interviews given by Akhil Gogoi to print and electronic media have been picked up for the thesis. These have entailed a detailed understanding and clarification of the ideas, ideology and functioning of KMSS. The thesis has attempted to understand the dynamics of the leadership of KMSS. From the leaders of KMSS, eighteen (18) of the responses have been collected who have been elected to the various posts of President, VP, Secretary and General Secretary of KMSS since 2010.

Parts of the second chapter and the third and fourth chapter of the thesis are exclusively written on the available sources thus collected.

### Phase II of fieldwork

Apart from the above mentioned sources, part of chapter 2 and chapter 5 of the thesis is exclusively written on the basis of field data, which is experimental as well as descriptive collected mainly by gathering observations. The field surveys were conducted from 2018 till the beginning of January, 2021. The set of data of the participants in the rallies and protest gatherings of KMSS are separated from the data collected from the members of the organisations. This is to provide clarity of analysis between the ordinary participants and the members/supporters of KMSS which represent two different groups with completely different points of view. For the sake of clarity this division is based on the members who actually are a part of the organisation and are structurally a part of it and the people who join the protests of KMSS and are on the streets fighting for their rights. The phase II of fieldwork comes from the peasantry who are structurally a part of KMSS. The data here comes in the form of ethnography, oral histories, personal accounts and narrations of the peasantry. The fields taken for the study are Doyang and Tengani region of Golaghat district of Assam. These two regions which will be explained in Chapter 2 of the thesis is the primary reason for the emergence of KMSS in 2005. The people of Doyang and Tengani, known as the parents of KMSS, are active supporters of KMSS and played an important role in its emergence as well as growth. In these two regions, some selected persons were interviewed who were part of the massive land rights movement which started in the year 2002. Of these the Presidents of Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti and Doyang Mukti Sangram Samiti were interviewed. There are 42 villages in Tengani and 126 villages in Doyang. The other people who were interviewed and engaged with were from Dighalimaaj village and Suratoni village of Tengani and Navagram Bijoypur and Bhelaguri village of Doyang.

Before making it for the fields I made some primary contacts with the locals of Doyang and Tengani through some acquaintances. Once I reached the field, it was easier to reach to a larger number of people for the one known acquaintance introduced me to many people who played an active role in the movement. Since they knew I was there to study their land rights movements they specifically took me to people who could narrate their story properly and took an active part in the mass movement. So that way it became easier to gather and collect the tales of the people who were an important part of the movement.

Here, ethnography has been important to analyze the social and political behavior, social structures and shared beliefs of the peasantry. Ethnographic methodology helped in looking at the peasantry in their particular social, political, economic and cultural setting/environment. This kind of participant observation and engagement has enabled a scientific description of the society and the people's behavior which has been instrumental in the research. The ultimate motive of adopting ethnography was to 'get under the skin' of the people and the society to understand the peasantry much better. Oral histories, personal accounts and narrations of the people of Doyang and Tengani have been collected at length which have come handy to analyze the movement and the politics of the peasant mobilisation led by KMSS apart from their own narrative of history as provided by its leaders. This paradox helps identify issues that were formally unavailable and help identify emotions and attitudes attached with the movement.

### Phase III of fieldwork

The third phase of the field work involved interacting and collecting responses from the peasantry as a mobilizing group in the protests sites led by KMSS. For this group, it has adopted sampling as a method. The nature of the sampling is non-probability sampling and the size of the sample is 300. The samples are collected on major protest sites, gatherings, dharnas and public meetings of KMSS. The responses are collected from the participants of various protests and gatherings of KMSS over many different issues ranging from price rise to worker's rights to issues concerning the region.

The rationale for choosing the method was keeping in view the mobilisations and mass movements which KMSS spearheaded. Since it is an organisation which has led major protest movements, it was important to know the participants and to get responses from them who are a part of KMSS protests. Again to track down the participants is an impossible task. So, for me the best way to get the most active responses was to be present at the protest sites of KMSS to actually know the peasantry and understand their prevailing situations, moods and responses. This exercise of being punctual at the protest sites involved keeping a track on almost every act of the peasant organisation. The responses collected from the protest sites are to know the background, age, class, caste, community, reason of their protests, profession

and their opinion of KMSS. There was a questionnaire adopted to have an overall social background of the protestors.

On 12<sup>th</sup> October of 2018, there was a major protest rally by KMSS in the road linking Cotton University and Deputy Commissioner's office in Guwahati on the incessant price rise of essential commodities. Around 250 people gathered in the protest site led by KMSS and I was present there to interview 80 of them present. On 6<sup>th</sup> of July, 2018 KMSS staged a protest dharna against the inhumane behavior on a worker by Mukesh Hyundai in Ganeshguri. On 5<sup>th</sup> July, 2018 one of the workers in the showroom was humiliated and forced to kneel down which was recorded on a mobile phone and went viral later the day. This sparked massive outrage and KMSS was one of the organisations to stage a protest dharna in front of Mukesh Hyundai showroom. Around 70-80 workers of Mukesh Hyundai supported KMSS's protest dharna and I interviewed around 25 of them.

There was a massive protest against OLA and UBER cab companies for paying negligible amount to the drivers on 22<sup>nd</sup> October of 2018. Around 400 cab drivers staged a massive strike in front of the offices in Khanapara, Guwahati for drastically reducing the incentives. A team of KMSS joined the protests led by the OLA/UBER drivers, demanding increase in incentives, extra bonus and minimum wage for every driver and to fulfill the demands of the workers. It was a day long strike and hence I could interview a 100 of the drivers who were relieved that KMSS supported their cause and participated in the strike.

An attempt was also made to trace the participants of a massive land rights movement by the city hill dwellers of Guwahati in the year 2013 where KMSS took an active part to mobilise the same. I could trace some of the hill dwellers in the hills of Geetanagar area of Guwahati. 26 families were interviewed from the Seuj Nagar street and Bhagadatta path of Outal area in Geetanagar. There was a massive land rights movement led by KMSS for the people residing in the hills of Guwahati who did not possess *myadi* pattas of land. From the talks and meeting I had with these people, it came to my knowledge that around 2000 people of Guwahati participated in the land rights movement led by KMSS. The people gave me an overall idea of the social background of the hill dwellers of Guwahati.

On 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of January, 2021, the convention of Rajjor Dal was held at Moran in Dibrugarh district of upper Assam. I was present on 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of January, 2021. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of January, a total of around 1000 people attended the convention and on 8<sup>th</sup> some 700 people attended the same. The people who came to this convention of Rajjor Dal were from the nearby areas of Moran, mostly from the villages. Though it was a convention of the political party of KMSS, it was significant in the sense that people sympathetic to the peasant organisation came to attend the convention. Throughout the two days that I was present, I was able to talk with a good number of around 150 people at the convention.

These were the protest sites of KMSS where I conducted the surveys. The questions that were asked to the protestors were preliminary and general concerning their income, caste, age, educational qualifications, reasons of their economic plight, reasons for joining KMSS's protests etc. This did not required much time to conduct the survey unlike the questionnaires I prepared for the leaders of the organisation. At the protest sites, people were forthcoming to the questions and willing to talk which helped to conduct the survey fast.

At the same time hermeneutics as the method of interpretation has been employed throughout the thesis to find meanings not only on texts and materials but also in social action and behavior. The demonstrations, gatherings, mass rallies, dharnas, public meetings of KMSS required the field presence where keen observation has been the primary tool to analyze the picture of its mobilisation. For other data that the thesis required, the Assam Human Development Report of 2014 and the census data of 2011 has been relied on.

### **Problems encountered on the field**

As a researcher, it was not possible to track down the members of KMSS throughout Assam and do a survey. KMSS was also not comfortable in providing the details of its members in various parts of Assam, though it provided a rough idea of its total members. While a number of field surveys have been conducted in Doyang and Tengani, the survey has been carried out mostly at protest sites of KMSS. This helped in getting the active responses of the public, though it represented only a prevalent situation. The situation at a particular protest site is different from a situation in another protest site. For example the situation/circumstances/state of protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act is totally

different from the situation/circumstances/state of protests against excessive price hike or for that case- corruption. This entails different moods of the public and hence it was difficult to gather a universal understanding and output of the field data. Another issue encountered on the field was that the people at the protest sites were from the nearby areas. Since most of the protests were organised in Guwahati, the people came from its nearby rural areas. This restricted the data only to the nearby areas of Guwahati and the possibility of collecting responses from every place of Assam was a hurdle. Thirdly, the major movements of KMSS like the land rights movement, anti-dam movement were launched in its early years of struggle. It was towards the end of 2017 that I started my field work. This was the time when only the anti-CAA movement garnered strength, besides other small mobilisations. The data collected doesn't reflect an equal coverage of all the issues of the peasants and the protests launched by KMSS since its inception. A period of two years was highly insufficient to understand the gradual peasant mobilisation of the KMSS.

Apart from these, the arrest of its members by the NIA under the UAPA has not made my visits to the office of the KMSS easy and accessible, for the organisation has been under continuous scanner of the state. The office holders were also uneasy in initiating a discussion and gave only the nitty gritty details of KMSS. Furthermore the Covid-19 lockdown in the country has prevented mobilisation of the peasants by KMSS which hampered a lot of my fieldwork which I was eagerly anticipating.

### **A review of the existing literature**

Since the study mainly concerns the operation of KMSS in the society, polity and economy of Assam, there exists a dearth of existing literature directly concerning the subject area. Another reason for the lack of adequate literature is the contemporariness of KMSS which was established in 2005, in an already globalizing and neo-liberal world. On the small volume of existing literature on the KMSS, the works of Sanjay Barbora and Udayon Misra who wrote commentary pieces on the politics of KMSS in 2011<sup>14</sup> in the *Economic and Political Weekly* is noteworthy. Barbora and Misra have described the struggle of KMSS as 'Assam's new voice of dissent' and as a "new edge to the people's protests in Assam". While

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<sup>14</sup> Both the commentary articles was published in July edition of Economic and Political Weekly in 2011.

exploring the nature of the struggle of KMSS, Barbora names the agitators as ‘professional agitationists’, it views the activism and political dissent of the organisation as different and markedly new from the usual political dissenters of the region.<sup>15</sup> Misra also views the peasant organisation in the same way, analyzing the specific struggle of it in the mass eviction of forest settlers of Doyang and Tengani<sup>16</sup> and giving a new story to the politics of mass protests in Assam.<sup>17</sup> The specific understanding of the politics of KMSS by Sanjay Barbora and Udayon Misra gives a rough picture of the peasant organisation in terms of its operation. Another important article by Arupjyoti Saikia discusses the forest and the peasant struggle of Assam during 2002-07. This article throws light on the agrarian mobilisation in Tengani and Doyang, which have resulted in a mass peasant movement and the contradictions that followed. But this was not related to the broader peasant movement of KMSS which started after it was formed in 2005, though the article do gives an understanding and the background of the peasant struggle which resulted in the rise of KMSS.<sup>18</sup> It may be mentioned that most of the studies on the contemporary forests rights in neoliberal India have been exclusively studied as distinct tribal movements or the indigenous people’s rights to their forest land because of the tribal’s dependence on forests and the ethnic factor, but there are peasant leaders like Sahajanand Saraswati and Ranga who described tribals as aboriginal kisans.<sup>19</sup> These unrests and revolts were mainly because of the continuous encroachment of their rich forest land by the big businesses and capitalist traders. Their revolts for their rights over the natural resources and the forests also get considered as environment struggles. The Naxalite movement is particularly on the peasant’s rights to their natural resources particularly forests. Similar movements have erupted in Orissa, Chhattisgarh because of the developments of the neoliberal state. So there have been many different movements which have erupted because of the developments of the neo-liberal state but have been identified as distinct identity or other issue based movement.

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<sup>15</sup> Barbora, S. (2011). Assam’s New Voice of Dissent. *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVI (28), 19-22.

<sup>16</sup> This will be illustrated in Chapter 2

<sup>17</sup> Misra, U. (2011). A New Edge to People’s Protests in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (28), 16-18.

<sup>18</sup> The history of the formation and birth of KMSS and its relation with Doyang and Tengani will be discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>19</sup> See Shah, G. (2004). *Peasant Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 93.

The idea of peasant's struggle in the history and politics of Assam has been explored at length by Arupjyoti Saikia and Amalendu Guha. Saikia discusses the agrarian landscape and peasant politics of Assam since the 1900s to the present date. The peasantry and the rural in Assam, as argued by Saikia has been a victim of usury which eventually led to sharecropping, landlessness, witnessed increasing conflict between the indigenous and migrant peasants, conflict over arable land etc. which eventually was addressed by the Communist parties and the Assam Legislative Assembly in many different ways.<sup>20</sup> In 'Planter Raj to Swaraj', Amalendu Guha explores the peasant's resentment during the colonial period over varied reasons thus giving a sketch of the nature of the peasant issues and worries in the history.<sup>21</sup> Amalendu Guha has given a brief account of the peasants in Assam during the colonial era where nationalism in the region was driven by both agrarian and linguistic factors. But this 'nationalism' as can be analyzed never gained strength owing to many external disturbances like immigration. These two illustrations have vividly shown a picture and a rough idea of the issues that peasant's have resisted and mobilised in the history of Assam. The history of peasant struggle has been important in understanding and situating the context of the present day struggle. Sanjib Baruah also explores how the British colonial policies acted against the interests of the peasants of Assam. Baruah illustrates how the colonial period led to the rising tension and insecurity of the Assamese peasants and the rural resources being increasingly controlled by the new industrial and global regime.<sup>22</sup> These literatures make us sound of the history of peasant struggle at large.

Coming to the specific operation of KMSS, the writings of the General Secretary of the organisation, Akhil Gogoi help a lot to comprehend the peasant organisation and its overall struggle. Gogoi's *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi* gives a vivid idea of its ideology, politics and its struggle in the larger context of the Assamese society. The book states the path of a democratic struggle to achieve peasant's welfare. The book enlists the main objectives and the many different forces of globalisation which are affecting the lives of peasants directly or

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<sup>20</sup> Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India.

<sup>21</sup> Guha, A. (2012). *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1926-1947*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.

<sup>22</sup> Baruah, S. (2007). *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 83-97.



indirectly.<sup>23</sup> *Marubhumi Aahe Lahe Lahe* is another work of Gogoi's wherein he has discussed the repercussions of big dams in Assam, and the exploitation of the people's natural resources by the state. This work also provides the readers an empirical account of the repercussions of mega dams throughout the world.<sup>24</sup> Basically this work attempts to bring into light the aftereffects and repercussions of big dams not only from his own point of view but also giving adequate empirical evidence. *Bideshi Xomoshya aru Jatiyo Andolanar Path* describes the ill effects of migration in Assam and also a historical depiction of the left political parties in handling the crisis.<sup>25</sup> Likewise in *Parivortonor Akhora*, Akhil Gogoi gives an overall idea of its struggle and political agenda covering a vast range of issues like corruption, migration, price rise and the like.<sup>26</sup> The latest work, *Asomia Jatiyotabad* elaborates on the idea of Assamese nationalism Gogoi idealizes in the struggle for a better society.<sup>27</sup> These books give a primary account of KMSS's ideas and ideology though written by Akhil Gogoi.

KMSS, established in 2005 in the globalizing and neo-liberal world makes it different from other peasant organisations in terms of its context. There hardly exists literature of the contemporary peasant mobilisation. Gail Omvedt in one of her articles has examined that the new peasant movement in India has grown outside the framework of the traditional left and has developed its own concepts of struggle and exploitation. The nature of its struggle though adheres to the Gandhian method of non-violence, at times engaged in campaigns including road and railway blockage, gheraos etc.<sup>28</sup> But all these have been studied in the context of Shetkari Sangathana in Maharashtra. Other studies on the strategies of peasant movements hardly exist, where peasantry has mostly been studied on the reason of their exploitation and revolution.<sup>29</sup> Ghanashyam Shah in his review of literature on peasant movements in India has not discussed the strategies of peasant movements which depicts the dearth of literature on the strategies of peasant movements.

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<sup>23</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash.

<sup>24</sup> Gogoi, A. (2012). *Marubhumi Aahe Lahe Lahe*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakaah.

<sup>25</sup> Gogoi, A. (2012). *Bideshi Xomoshya aru Jatiya Andolanar Path*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash.

<sup>26</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhora*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash.

<sup>27</sup> Gogoi, A. (2018). *Asomiya Jatiyatabad*. Guwahati: Banalata Publishers.

<sup>28</sup> Omvedt, G. ((1988). The "New peasant movement" in India. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 20 (2), 14-23.

<sup>29</sup> See Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 35-76.

However on more generalized terms, to have a more lucid understanding on the subject, literature on peasant mobilisation has been useful. Much of the literary work on peasant struggle and mobilisation in India has firstly banked upon the colonial struggle wherein they focus on the national struggle that peasants in India have long been a part of. Secondly heavy scholarship in the post colonial period includes many large scale peasant movements across the nation dissatisfied with the state led developments. For instance Singharoy in *Peasants Movement in Post-colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilisation and Identity* engages at length three peasant movements which are the Tebhaga movement (1946-47) in West Bengal, the Telangana Movement (1946-52) in Andhra Pradesh and the Naxalbari Movement (1967-71) in West Bengal. These two strands of literature dominates most of the work on peasant mobilisations in India.<sup>30</sup> The nature, form and trends of peasant mobilisation have also been quite useful in comprehending and analyzing peasant struggle and uprisings in India. Mridula Mukherjee has analyzed the nonviolent way of peasant mobilisation in colonial India under Gandhian framework.<sup>31</sup> This adds to understanding particular traits of peasant mobilisation which revolves certain demands and issues where peasant struggles emerged.

While there are rich literature on ‘peasant struggle and mobilisations’, which provides a structural framework to start the thesis with, there is also a dearth of literature on the operation and peasant movement by KMSS in Assam.

### **Assam- A brief introduction**

Assam, which merged with India through the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, has since then witnessed major changes in the society, demography, polity and economy. The integration of Assam in the British Indian territory marked the entry of Assam into a ‘colonial phase’ from its ‘pre capitalist economy’.<sup>32</sup> A state in the north-east region of India, linked through a

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<sup>30</sup> Singharoy, K. D. (2004). *Peasant's Movement in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilisation and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

<sup>31</sup> Mukherjee, M. (2004). *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

<sup>32</sup> Amalendu Guha notes that the period 1826-1873 as a period of transition from its pre-capitalist economy into the colonial phase, where British capital penetrated the economy and paved the way towards capitalism. See Guha, A. (2006). *Planter Raj to Swaraj. Freedom struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, p. 20.

‘chicken-neck’ corridor with the rest of India, the socio-political scenario has often been dominated by ethnic conflicts and identity movements. It has been a conflict-ridden state, with ethnic upsurges in the form of movements and identity politics which has been a major issue. The diversity of Assam can be seen in its multiple ethnicities, linguistic and religious groups and many nationalities.<sup>33</sup> The self assertion of the multiple ethnic, indigenous communities demanding separate statehoods has become a regular phenomenon since independence, resulting in armed separatist movements by revolutionary groups. The formation of Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland from the territory of Assam has been the result of such strong assertion. After independence, the porous border of India and Bangladesh has led to the influx of unregulated migration into the territory of Assam thereby creating imbalance not only in demography but also in economy, society and polity. Large insecurities of the ‘sons of the soil’ becoming a minority in their own lands led to widespread movements across the state, most notably the Assam anti-foreigners movement which sparked in 1979 and continued for 6 long years. The many different ethnic upsurges in the form of strong separatist autonomy movements have been the characteristic feature of post-colonial Assam.

One of the many issues that have been raised in the ethnic upsurges by different indigenous communities has been the issue of economic development of their region and the community. Assam, economically, has been a ‘periphery’ of India,<sup>34</sup> with its exclusive dependence on the centre. The people of Assam have long been agitating over the rights of the people on the natural resources of the region. Assam is bountiful in natural resources with lands, natural gas, crude oil, tea, rubber, plywood, jute etc. Since long, Assam always expressed dissatisfaction over the inadequate share of the resources and revenues and the step-motherly attitude of the central government.<sup>35</sup> The autonomy movements of various organisations such as the United Liberation Front of Assam, National Democratic Front of Bodoland and others have resorted to claiming independent states because of the

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<sup>33</sup> Hussain notes that North-east India is the home of innumerable nationalities, national minorities and ethnic groups belonging to different races, colours, religious persuasions and linguistic groups. The statement has largely been adapted from Hussain’s statement . Hussain, M. (2007). *Interrogating Development: State, Displacement and Popular Resistance in North-East India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Hussain, M. (2007). *Interrogating Development: State, Displacement and Popular Resistance in North-East India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> See Chandra, B, *India Since Independence*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

disproportionate share of the natural resources, becoming a minority in their alienation from its resources. The leaders of the Assam Movement (1979-1985) which aimed at detection and deletion of foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 was also apprehensive of the natural resources of the state which was fast becoming alienated as a result of large number of foreigners in the state. The politics of Assam is intertwined with identity politics, developmental issues, insurgency movements etc. While the insurgency movements have emerged immediately after the post-independence era, the migration issue has become dominant in the social and political life of the Assamese people since the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> Identity in Assam has been a contested debate. The society and politics of Assam for long has been galvanized on issues around 'identity'. The northeast region of India has long fought for its identity on grounds of greater representation of its people; greater share of its natural resources; protection of their land, resources, language, culture and economic development.<sup>37</sup> Protection of identity was negotiated on larger grounds of economic development of the region. In Assam, the politics and development have centered around complex identity issues of many different ethnic groups like the Bodo, Karbis, Dimasas have claimed to their own definite share of resources and greater recognition. Immigration has posed a bigger threat to the ethnic identity of the people who claim themselves to be the 'sons of the soil'. Land has become alienable and scarce. The collective peasant identity of the people of Assam was submerged when individual and autonomous ethnic identity movements surfaced.

Thus there have been two basic issues which dominate the entire scenario of Assam. Firstly, it is the issue of indigenous movements that comes with ethnic violence and identity assertion. This emerged with successive migration from India and outside which started since colonial conquest of the territory. Secondly, it is the continuous aspirations for rapid economic development of the region. Development has been on the agendas of all the political parties, organisations and civil society groups of Assam. Both the two issues have been intrinsically linked, with the later becoming a compensation for the numerous ethnic

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<sup>36</sup> It was in 1979 that the Assam movement started following large scale immigration from the neighbor country, Bangladesh.

<sup>37</sup> Most of the movements and prolonged armed agitation by many ethnic groups have settled for peace with the Indian state only on grounds of greater protection of their identity and economic development of the region. For example the Assam Movement which ended in 1985 followed by the Assam Accord signed between the leaders of the movement and the Government of India, due safeguards and economic development has been given in clause 6 of the accord.

groups demanding separation from the Indian union or greater autonomy. The post-colonial Indian state has been on a steady move towards economic development. Monirul Hussain states that the people of the North-east India started perceiving the post-colonial state as an institution of development 'giver'.<sup>38</sup> 'Development became crucial' Hussain notes, 'for a frontier region like North East, particularly Assam, entrapped as it was in a high degree of economic exploitation, extraction and marginalization as a colonial hinterland.'<sup>39</sup> Almost all the indigenous movements of the region have agreed or negotiated with the state for economic development.

The peasantry is an unidentified community amongst these issues of identity politics and development. Ethnic communities of Assam, the Bodos, Karbis, Rabhas, Kacharis often claim to be the original sons of the soil, the tiller of the land. Assam economy is a peasant economy, a large chunk of the people of ethnic communities engaging in agricultural and allied activities. The colonial period of Assam witnessed imposition of land revenue, capitalizing peasant economy, and bringing indentured and bonded labour to tea plantations. These issues, though related to the peasantry failed to identify the heterogeneous ethnic identity that the peasantry belonged to. The narrative of the peasantry of Assam of saving their lands from foreign encroachment gets submerged within the larger narrative of the native indigenous groups protecting their individual ethnic identities. Though the ethnic groups too have been asserting of saving their lands, it has submerged the peasantry issue and brought to the forefront the protection of the individual ethnic identities. The peasantry belongs to diverse ethnic groups of Assam; which is an important point to note.

Likewise the developmental agenda, which occupies an important place in the social, economic and political life of Assam has often been equated with the development of the ethnic/indigenous communities of Assam. The indigenous groups of Assam has been a victim of continuous exploitation and has been explored by Monirul Hussain how the post colonial state in the name of development and urbanization acquired lands from the indigenous peasantry at low rates and drove them to the periphery. Assam was, as Hussain

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<sup>38</sup>Hussain, M. (2007). *Interrogating Development: State, Displacement and Popular Resistance in North-East India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup>Hussain, M. (2007). *Interrogating Development: State, Displacement and Popular Resistance in North-East India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 18.

notes, “was entrapped in a high degree of economic exploitation, extraction and marginalization as a colonial hinterland”.<sup>40</sup> The demand for separate ethnic homelands has been met by the state with adequate powers of representation to the indigenous groups with future promises of safeguards and economic development.

While the two issues have dominated the nationalist thought of the larger Assamese society, the peasantry has offered us another dimension to understand the complexities and dynamics of Assam’s politics.

### **The Statistics of Assam**

According to the 2011 census data, the population of Assam stands at 3.12 crores, where 85.90 percent of the population lives in the rural areas while 14.10 percent lives in the urban areas.<sup>41</sup> The total population living in the rural areas is 26,807,034 while in the urban areas it is 4,398,542.<sup>42</sup> There are 26,395 villages in Assam while there are 214 towns.<sup>43</sup> In India the rural-urban distribution is 68.84 percent and 31.16 percent.<sup>44</sup> So, compared to the all India statistics, Assam is more of a rural economy and society. The number of rural population in Assam is quite high as compared to the all India level. The census reported that the total area of Assam is 78,438 square kilometers, with 98 percent of its area falling under rural areas.<sup>45</sup> Assam has 26 Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the state accounting for 12.44 percent of the state’s population and 22 Scheduled Castes (SC) accounting 7.15 percent of the state’s population. Assam is primarily an agrarian society where more than 52 percent of the total labour force is directly engaged in agriculture according to the census data. Depending on the Assam’s topography and weather, rice (paddy) cultivation is most suitable. Major food crops are rice, wheat, maize and cash crops include tea, jute, timber, tobacco etc. Apart from cultivating food crops and cash crops in the region, animal husbandry and handloom weaving

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<sup>40</sup> Hussain, M. (2007). *Interrogating Development: State, Displacement and Popular Resistance in North-East India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

<sup>41</sup> Accessed <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/assam.html> on 21.08.2018. The rural population of Assam was 26807034 while the urban population was 4398542 according to 2011 census.

<sup>42</sup> Accessed from <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/assam.html> on 18.12.2018.

<sup>43</sup> Accessed <https://des.assam.gov.in/information-services/state-profile-of-assam> on 20.08.2018.

<sup>44</sup> The Census of India 2011 by Registrar General & Census Commissioner India, Ministry of Home Affairs, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2011.

<sup>45</sup> See Planning and Development Department, Government of Assam, (2014). Assam Human Development Report, 2014. Managing Diversities, Achieving Human Development, pp. 212-214.

are major sources of income among the rural population. The major industries in Assam are oil and natural gas, tea, plywood, handloom and dairy. In 2016 the number of small tea growers in Assam stood at 84577 whereas the big tea growers were counted at 767.<sup>46</sup> Given this statistics, Assam is more of an agrarian economy, producer of goods where most of its revenue comes from agricultural and allied services. The region is rich in natural gas and crude oil and is one of the highest producers among the Indian states.

The agricultural census defined the different classes of farmers in accordance to their size of landholdings. The marginal farmer who owns below 1.00 hectare of land, 1 to 2.00 hectares as small farmers, 2-4.00 hectares as small-medium farmers, from 4-10 hectares as medium farmers and large farmers as those who owns more than 10 hectares of land.<sup>47</sup> As per the Human Development Report of Assam of 2014, 83.4 percent of the total peasants in Assam are marginal with less than 7.5 bighas of land, 12.3 percent are small peasants having agricultural land between 7.5 and 15 bighas, 2.2 percent are medium possessing between 15 and 21 bighas and 1.1 percent are large scale peasants in Assam with more than 22 bighas of agricultural land. Furthermore 48.5 percent of the people in Assam are without cultivable or agricultural land and 89.5 percent are without irrigation facilities.<sup>48</sup> Land has become alienable and the number of landless has been increasing rapidly in Assam. Hiren Gohain notes that annual floods, soil erosion and numerous state led developments for industrial production are the underlying causes of the increasing number of landlessness in the state.<sup>49</sup> Eviction of the people for the sake of development and industrialization has also been proved fatal for the peasants. Monirul Hussain gives a good understanding of the processes of displacement caused by state led developments and processes of urbanization. Land acquisition by the state for defence and security purposes, environment protection, transport and communication, water resource projects, industry etc are some of the aspects of development which have displaced a large number of people, living at the margins of the

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<sup>46</sup> Accessed <https://des.assam.gov.in/information-services/state-profile-of-assam> on 21.08.2018.

<sup>47</sup> Report on Agricultural Census, 2010-11, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> The Human Development Report of 2014 survey was carried out after 10 years; the first one was in 2003. The samples were collected of over 40,000 households and 1,90,000 individuals. See Planning and Development Department, Government of Assam, (2014). Assam Human Development Report, 2014. Managing Diversities, Achieving Human Development, pp. 212-214.

<sup>49</sup> Gohain, H. (2019). *Struggling in a Time Warp*. Guwahati: Bhabani Books, pp. 341-345.

society.<sup>50</sup> Significantly, most of the displaced persons in these projects have been the indigenous people of Assam, from whom land were acquired at very low rates by the state. The current socio-economic and political crisis of these groups of people in Assam can be traced to these factors in general. The inequality in the size of the landholdings is stark and it is presented in the following tables.

**Table 0.1: Size class distribution of operational holding in 2014 (in percentage)**

District	Marginal (< 7.5 bigha)	Small (7 to 15 bigha)	Medium (15 to 21 bigha)	Large (> 21 bigha)
Baksa	81.9	14.6	2.2	1.3
Barpeta	86.9	11.7	1.0	0.4
Bongaigaon	90.9	8.7	0.3	0.1
Cachar	95.1	4.7	0.2	0.1
Chirang	77.3	18.5	2.6	1.6
Darrang	90.2	6.8	2.0	1.0
Dhemaji	59.8	28.5	7.6	4.1
Dhubri	93.0	5.5	1.3	0.1
Dibrugarh	91.1	7.8	0.6	0.5
Dima Hasao	83.2	16.8	0.0	0.0
Goalpara	88.3	9.5	1.2	1.0
Golaghat	76.2	19.4	2.7	1.7
Hailakandi	94.3	4.7	0.5	0.6
Jorhat	82.3	15.1	1.2	1.3
Kamrup	91.3	7.2	0.9	0.6
Kamrup (M)	85.7	10.6	1.9	1.9
Karbi Anglong	75.3	19.9	3.6	1.1

<sup>50</sup> Monirul Hussain has specifically engaged with the state led development projects for he notes that the private investment in the development projects is abysmally low. Hussain shows hoe socio-economic development became a part of the larger nation building state in the immediate post-colonial state of India. Hussain, M. (2008). *Interrogating Development. State, Displacement and Popular Resistance in North-East India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.



Karimganj	89.6	8.6	1.2	0.6
Kokrajhar	51.0	29.8	15.9	3.3
Lakhimpur	75.0	19.3	4.0	1.7
Marigaon	86.7	11.4	0.9	1.1
Nagaon	78.7	16.3	3.1	2.0
Nalbari	90.9	7.4	1.3	0.5
Sibsagar	86.5	12.4	0.6	0.5
Sonitpur	82.5	13.1	2.5	1.8
Tinsukia	86.3	11.0	1.4	1.3
Udalguri	84.4	12.2	2.1	1.3
Assam	84.3	12.3	2.2	1.1

**Source: Assam Human Development Report, 2014**

**Table 0.2: District wise landlessness in Assam**

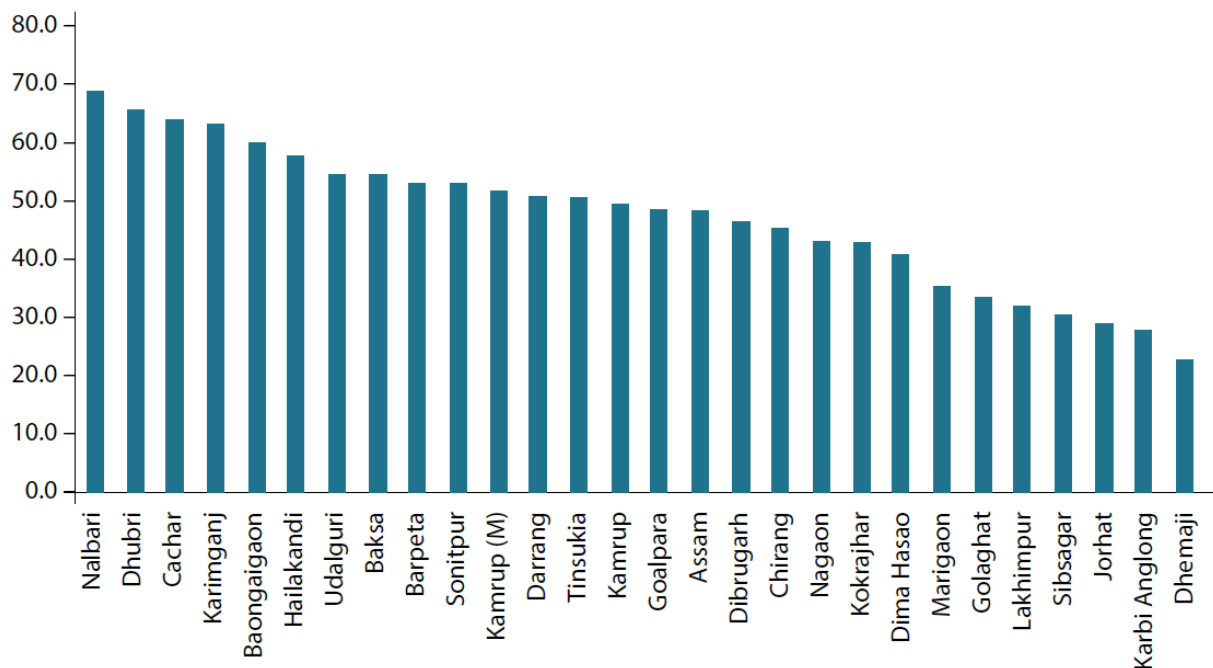
District	No Homestead Land	No Cultivable Land	No Irrigated Land
Baksa	0.6	54.5	75.8
Barpeta	0.3	53.3	67.2
Bongaigaon	0.5	60.3	85.4
Cachar	1.5	63.8	92.6
Chirang	0.0	45.3	75.7
Darrang	0.3	51.0	80.5
Dhemaji	0.4	22.9	99.1
Dhubri	1.0	65.9	77.6
Dibrugarh	3.9	46.4	100.0
Dima Hasao	0.0	41.1	71.9
Goalpara	0.1	48.7	92.1
Golaghat	0.4	33.7	98.9
Hailakandi	0.8	58.0	76.7

Jorhat	0.2	29.0	98.9
Kamrup	0.2	49.5	93.3
Kamrup (M)	0.8	52.1	90.6
Karbi Anglong	1.8	27.8	97.9
Karimganj	0.6	63.2	93.3
Kokrajhar	0.5	42.7	83.7
Lakhimpur	0.5	32.1	99.7
Marigaon	0.1	35.2	83.4
Nagaon	1.4	43.0	88.0
Nalbari	0.4	68.8	95.9
Sibsagar	0.6	30.7	98.1
Sonitpur	1.0	53.2	97.4
Tinsukia	0.4	50.4	99.5
Udalguri	1.2	54.7	94.2
Assam	0.8	48.5	89.5

Source: **Assam Human Development Report, 2014.**

The further agricultural landlessness in rural areas of Assam can be illustrated in diagram below

**Table 0.3: Agricultural landlessness in rural Assam (district-wise)**



**Source: Assam Human Development Report, 2014.**

The above tables and figure give the scenery of agrarian and rural plight of the peasants of Assam. The economy of Assam is primarily a rural and agrarian economy with major sources of income coming from the rural and agrarian economy. Peasants form an integral and inseparable part of the society in Assam with majority of the workforce engaged directly or indirectly in agricultural or allied activities. The discussion hereafter will attempt to understand the politics of the peasantry as organised by KMSS in the politics, society and economy of Assam.



## **Chapter One**

### **Understanding the Peasantry**

Understanding the peasantry involves a complex analysis of historical, social, economic, cultural and political issues. In a country like India, where the major chunk of the economy depends on the agrarian sector, the peasantry occupies an important place not just in the economic sector but also the political and social sector. Besides the economic or the material factors that drives peasant mode of living, the peasantry is also driven by socio-political and cultural factors of the larger society. Throughout history, the peasantry has been a dissenting category because it has been a subject of domination and exploitation. Studies on the peasantry have mainly concentrated on agrarian distress, mobilisation, resistance and the rural-urban divide that is looming large with the onset of globalisation. This chapter explores the range of debates and frameworks available to understand the peasant through its location in various social, historical, material and political contexts. It aims at contextualizing the peasant, by considering the history, society, polity and economy of India, most notably of Assam. It also attempts to build the discourse of peasant mobilisation through many approaches that helps us understand peasant resistance and mobilisation through different explanatory frameworks. For that sake the chapter is divided into four sections. The first section will critically engage on the varied definitions of a ‘peasant’ for there are many overlapping conceptions of defining a peasant and designating the same. The second section attempts to understand the dynamics and nature of peasant mobilisation. The third section will involve a study of the different theoretical approaches for the study of the peasantry. The fourth section highlights the peasant dynamics and trends in India, specially focusing on the relation between the Indian state and the peasantry. The fifth section proceeds to situate the discourse of peasant mobilisation and studies in context of Assam. These discussions in the above mentioned sections will attempt to understand the peasantry in its vivid manifestations aiming to clarify that there is not a singular understanding of the peasantry. It will be seen that although there is a fixed identity of class among the peasantry, the chapter argues that there must be a dynamic understanding of the same firstly because of the

changing and evolving nature of the peasantry as a result of many developments and secondly because a singular approach or a framework can never adequately address the same. The chapter provides the base to start the discussion of peasant mobilisation in contemporary Assam under KMSS.

### **1.1. Who is a Peasant?**

The term 'peasant' as has been seen in history, implies many different aspects. Ghanshyam Shah says the term 'peasant' is ambiguous, which have meant different things for different scholars, which has included landless agricultural labourers, small scale agriculturalist and supervisory agriculturalist.<sup>1</sup> Eric R. Wolf while understanding peasants, distinguishes it from the 'primitives' and 'modern' and refers to the large segments of the mankind which stand in between the primitive tribe and industrial society.<sup>2</sup> While acknowledging that the industrial society is built on the ruins of the peasant society, Wolf says that the peasantry is underdeveloped and whose presence 'constitutes both a threat and a responsibility for the countries which have thrown off the shackles of backwardness'.<sup>3</sup> Eric R. Wolf emphasized that the 'ownership of land' was a defining criteria for peasants, who are primarily involved in cultivation.<sup>4</sup> Eric R. Wolf says, "Peasants are rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surpluses both to underwrite its own standard of living and to distribute the remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in turn".<sup>5</sup> At the same time Wolf maintains that in a peasant society the peasants are not in control of the means of production unlike a primitive society where the producers control the means of production including their own labour.<sup>6</sup>

The peasantry, as identified by Wolf is an underdeveloped community, which though are producers do not control the means of production, which infact is controlled by a dominant class of rulers. The peasantry is identified as a class category coexisting with a dominant

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<sup>1</sup> Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Wolf. E. R. (1966). *Peasants*. London: Princeton-Hall International Inc, p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> Wolf. E. R. (1966). *Peasants*. London: Princeton-Hall International Inc, p. vii.

<sup>4</sup> Wolf. E. R. (1966). *Peasants*. London: Princeton-Hall International Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Wolf. E. R. (1966). *Peasants*. London: Princeton-Hall International Inc, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Wolf. E. R. (1966). *Peasants*. London: Princeton-Hall International Inc, p. 3.

group of rulers. According to Mridula Mukherjee, “The peasantry is, arguably, the oldest “class” in the world. It not only predated but provided the basis for the emergence of the kings, the nobles and the feudal lords, the merchants and the traders. All other social classes are at least a few centuries younger than the peasantry, and the industrial working class almost an infant in comparison.”<sup>7</sup> The peasant is presented as a class category, Teodor Shanin describing it as a ‘class of low classness’.<sup>8</sup> While going through history one can say that a peasant is a cultivator who tills land. With the advent of industrial revolution, the term peasant was simultaneously used as ‘agricultural labour’ or ‘agricultural workers’. Eric R. Wolf explains that with Industrial Revolution and the increased demand for food at a large scale to feed the industrial workers, agriculture came to be capitalized with scientifically operated farms, where such farms were staffed not by peasants who are small rural cultivators, but by agricultural workers who are paid wages like industrial workers.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the peasants who worked on the fields of the landlords were also called as labourers the landless labourers.<sup>10</sup> The peasant movement in Oudh (1919-22) was a movement by the landless peasants who pledged to not work as labourers without payment.<sup>11</sup> Likewise there are peasant revolts which agitated against forced unpaid labour.<sup>12</sup> Exploitation of the peasants under colonial empires has impoverished the peasants and gradually they turned into worker. The greater struggle and the fight against capitalism and colonialism have led to a peasant-worker nexus. So, defining a peasant as constructed by history and society is complex.

It is noteworthy that the peasantry is always defined as an economic group which determines its position in the society. Like the Oxford English Dictionary defines a peasant as ‘a poor smallholder or agricultural labourer of low social status (chiefly in historical use or with

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<sup>7</sup> Mukherjee, M. (2004). *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from Hobsbawm, E. R. (1973). Peasant and Politics. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1 (1), 3-22.

<sup>9</sup> See Wolf, E. R. (1966). *Peasants*. London: Princeton-Hall International Inc, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Shah maintains that clubbing the peasants and the agricultural labourers raises some problems since in recent times an agricultural labourer is not tied down to the same master like in the colonial and pre colonial era. According to Shah, in capitalist agriculture, majority of the labourers are not bonded. See Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 35-36.

<sup>11</sup> Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 50.

reference to subsistence farming in poorer countries)'.<sup>13</sup> The Cambridge dictionary defines it as 'a person who owns or rents a small piece of land and grows crops, keeps animals etc on it, especially one who has a low income, very little education, and a low social position.'<sup>14</sup> Beteille observes three distinct tendencies of a peasant. Firstly, the peasant is attached to land either as owner, tenant, sharecropper or labourer; secondly, they occupy a low position both in the economic and in the political terms of the society; and thirdly, the oppression and exploitation of the peasants have a political dimension.<sup>15</sup> The peasantry is a major component in the society, whose economic condition has signaled an upheaval among them to form a space to collectively assert their rights and due position. Debal K. SinghaRoy defines peasants as subsistence and small scale cultivators, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers and poor artisans who work on the land to eke out their livelihood primarily from agriculture by their own labour. Singha Roy also notes that peasants as social groups are socially and economically marginalized, culturally subjugated and politically disempowered, and are attached to the land to eke out a subsistence living.<sup>16</sup>

A peasant is then is not only a tiller of the land, but one who is engaged in many different forms of rural subsistence, be it farming, fishing, tilling, or engaged in various crafts and art which forms a definite part of their culture and society. One aspect of the peasantry is evident that it occupies a low social position almost at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. The village or the rural India not only comprises the different classes of peasants but also the rural artisans, workers and manual labourers. In Marxian analysis the workers and the peasants experiences the same level of exploitation; they occupy the lowest position in the hierarchical society. Both have been a 'resisting lot' and the potential of starting a revolution. Class has been an enduring factor in defining the peasantry.

In contemporary times, most scholars use the term 'farmer' rather than 'peasant' for a peasant is defined as the one who produces for his own consumption, where a farmer aims

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<sup>13</sup> Accessed from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/peasant> on 15.11.2018.

<sup>14</sup> Accessed from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/peasant> on 15.11.2018.

<sup>15</sup> Singharoy, K. D. (2004). *Peasant's Movement in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilisation and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Singharoy, K. D. (2004). *Peasant's Movement in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilisation and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 23-24.



the market.<sup>17</sup> This difference has mainly emerged with the onset of globalisation, with advancement in agricultural technology and participation in the market. Globalisation has taken an active path in changing the economic conditions and livelihood of peasants. Sudha Pai uses the term ‘farmers’ movement’ to denote the contemporary movement in the agrarian sector affected by globalisation. At the same time Pai applies the term ‘peasant movements’ to imply the anti-feudal movements against landlords or the state in the post-independence period.<sup>18</sup> The rise of the market implies changes in agrarian sector where peasantry is a term used to denote feudal activities. Most scholars keep a distinction between the two, with their area of operation. However Gail Omvedt has preferred to use the term ‘peasant’ instead of a ‘farmer’ in her article ‘The new peasant movement of India’ on the ground that the peasant refers to a more ‘traditional, subsistence-oriented cultivator as contrasted with the more modern market-oriented farmer’ and the fact remains that ‘whatever the spread of market forces and the changing orientation of the Indian peasants, they continue to have their social and historical roots in a tradition that has persisted for thousands of years’.<sup>19</sup> The use of the terms farmers and peasants mainly have arisen out of socio-economic contexts, where scholars have kept a distinction of traditional and contemporary issues- the feudal system and market complexities which have impacted the agricultural sector. The difference between the peasant and the farmer is very much the dichotomy between the traditional and modern society. This does not mean that the peasantry as a category has changed much because of modernization where the traditional modes of subsistence still exist. E. J. Hobsbawm maintains that it is difficult to establish the point as to why the term ‘peasantry’ is no longer applicable in the modern context. At the same time Hobsbawm draws in evidence of the same to the commercial farmers of 19<sup>th</sup> century England and the rural proletarians of big plantations economies constituted as part of the ‘agrarian problem’ and not ‘peasant

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<sup>17</sup> Varshney, A. (1995). *Democracy, development and the countryside: Urban-rural struggles in India*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Sudha Pai classifies three kinds of movements in the agrarian sector of India. The first is the peasant movement led by the peasantry in the immediate post independence period, which includes anti-feudal movements, land grab movements, land redistribution movements etc. The second is the movement led by the rich peasants or the capitalist farmers demanding policies beneficial to them. The third is the rise of the farmers movement in the wake of globalisation which resulted in a number of developments on the agricultural sector. See Pai, S. (2010). Farmers’ Movements. In Jayal & Mehta, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (pp.391-408). New Delhi: Oxford University Press

<sup>19</sup> Omvedt further states that no such distinction of a peasant and a farmer can be made in the case of Indian languages citing examples such as kisan, raitu, shetkari etc. See Omvedt, G. (1988). The “New Peasant Movement” in India. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 20 (2), 14-23.

problem'.<sup>20</sup> The absence of advanced industrialism and capitalism in developing countries may point out to the relevance of the peasant as a category.

These different analyses of the peasantry make it a class category, often identified in relation to its profession and manual labour it engages, lower in social and economic hierarchy with a seemingly shared history of tradition.

## **1.2. Dynamics of Peasant Mobilisation**

There exists a doubt whether a mobilisation can be called a 'movement' if it is collective, prolonged and enduring. There have been many mobilisations, but hardly one takes the shape of a movement. Mobilisation can generally be defined as an act of organizing the masses to achieve a common purpose or a particular objective. A movement is an organised action of a group of people for bringing about desired change in the society, polity or economy. Mobilisation is a necessary if not a sufficient condition for a movement. We have witnessed in history mobilisation of different sections of people on grounds of caste, class, religion, language and region; and also of workers, peasants, labourers and the like. A prolonged mobilisation may not even result in a strong movement. Amrita Baviskar defines social movement as "sustained collective action over time" and "a general orientation to bring about (or prevent) change".<sup>21</sup>

T.K Oommen identified social movements as forms of collective actions, intended with a purpose to promote change and stability. Oommen says that this collective action always uses a means (violent or non-violent) and functions within an organisational framework.<sup>22</sup> Sociologists in identifying social movements around the world employed 'goal', 'means', 'scope' and 'content' as their criteria in understanding social movements.<sup>23</sup> While some used selected categories, not all the categories were employed at a same time. This observation by Oommen led to his own articulation of understanding social movements by employing all the categories. Social movements has been perceived as a sort of collective mobilisation to bring about changes in a system, ranging from partial changes, changes in the structural system or

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<sup>20</sup> See Hobsbawm, E. R. (1973). Peasant and Politics. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1 (1), 3-22.

<sup>21</sup> Baviskar, A. (2010). Social Movements. In Jayal & Mehta, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (pp.381-390). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Oommen, T. K. (2010). *Social Movements I: Issues of Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Oommen, T. K. (2010). *Social Movements I: Issues of Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.7-11.

revolutionary (radical) changes; which varies from each other in terms of 'intensity of conflicts'.<sup>24</sup> Oommen has categorized movements on the basis of three crucial elements- ideology, organisation and leadership. Whatever be the typology or the nature of such movements, social movements are primarily anchored on larger issues of identity, equity and security. The Assam movement (1979-1985) was primarily a movement of the larger Assamese identity and security of the community from foreigners at the same time. We can also witness movements centering around concerns of equity like the movements on civil rights, feminist movements focusing on gender equality, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and transgender (LGBT) movements, worker's movement and many more. The greatest revolutions like the French revolution emerged because of the rising social and economic inequality in the society.

Such movements primarily arise of the long felt injustice or a dire need to change the existing system of relation, of the rigid structure which was not favorable to a major section of the society. Emancipation from unjust rules, practices thus, has been the primary motive behind mass movements. While the struggle of the peasants against landlordism and exploitation is an old phenomenon and many such movements have emerged in the due course, the rural and agrarian structure can barely be said to be egalitarian, where inequality still exists.

Peasant movements, throughout history have witnessed major revolutionary upheavals, because of exploitation and oppression that they have been subjected to. Ghanshyam Shah going through major literatures have identified three major reasons of peasant movements driven mainly by class oppression viz. a) deterioration of their economic conditions because of inflation, price rise etc; b) structural changes resulting in the increase of exploitation of peasants and c) rising aspirations of the peasantry to improve their economic conditions.<sup>25</sup> There has been a strong relation between the economic condition and peasant struggle in many of the writings on peasant movement. Whereas for some, it is not only the deteriorating economic conditions but also the subjective conditions like presence of a strong organisation,

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<sup>24</sup> Oommen going through various literatures have concluded that these conflicts vary from the kind of changes that these movements pursue where the conflicts are the least in movements which seek reform, which changes in transformative movements, and in the revolutionary movement's conflicts acquire a higher degree. See Oommen, T. K. (2010). *Social Movements I. Issues of Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 11-12.

<sup>25</sup> See Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements In India*. New Delhi: Sage publications, p. 46.

leadership and ideology that can stir and sustain peasant movements.<sup>26</sup> Deprivation may not be a sufficient condition for peasant uprising whilst it may be the primary condition. The All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) had been working for the cause of Indian peasant since colonial times. The Champaran Satyagraha (1917) in Bihar witnessed the role of charismatic leadership, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in mobilizing the peasants whereas the Naxalite movement, Telangana Movement was driven by strong Marxist ideology. There have been deep connections between the subjective conditions and objective realities, which give rise to successful peasant movement. The Champaran Satyagraha that was led by Gandhi, not only witnessed the mobilisation of peasant by a powerful leader but was possible because of the plight of the peasants. Shah notes that it is the leaders which are responsible for translating the objective causes into subjective consciousness and successive peasant mobilisation.<sup>27</sup>

Contextual analysis shows the nature of peasant mobilisation varies from nation to nation, region to region. The peasant uprisings of China, France, Vietnam, Russia showed different moments of upheavals with difference in their nature. Even in India, there is not a single universal character of the peasant mobilisation till recent times. Peasant behavior, struggle result from different contexts, geography and studies are evidence. However peasant mobilisation in the contemporary era is not only related to anti-feudal struggle, but price and related issues.<sup>28</sup> Sudha Pai gives five criteria on understanding the typologies of agrarian movements in the post independence India viz. 1) the pattern of landownership which at large determines the class structure, mode of production and agrarian relations; 2) the state policies which effect the agrarian sector; 3) changes because of technology; 4) pattern of mobilisation (class/caste) and lastly 5) leadership alongwith strategies, demands and issues.<sup>29</sup> The determinants of peasant movement have led to different typologies of agrarian struggle; its understanding should not be delegated to feudalism.

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<sup>26</sup> Ghanshyam Shah in the literature review of peasant movements, have used Sunil Sen's and Henningham's views to put forward the subjective and objective conditions that gives rise to peasant movements. See Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements In India*. New Delhi: Sage publications.

<sup>27</sup> See Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements In India*. New Delhi: Sage publications, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Nadkarni, M. V. (1987). *Farmers' Movement in India*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited. Nadkarni states that the new farmers movement which focused on price and related issues started in the late 1970s, has been a prominent feature of the states of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka.

<sup>29</sup> Pai, S. (2010). *Farmers' Movements*. In Jayal & Mehta, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (pp.391-406). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Although peasant resistance and movements have been different and varies across regions, nations, geographies and methods one common thread of them all is the class struggle which exists since history. Mridula Mukherjee understands the peasantry as, “Peasant history is simultaneously a story of rebellion and of silent suffering, of collective action and of individualism”.<sup>30</sup> Sociologist T. K. Oommen understands movements as ‘conscious efforts on the part of the people who are at the periphery of the system’ and who have been deprived of the ‘wealth power or privilege or all of them’.<sup>31</sup> Oommen says, “Social movements are mechanisms through which an attempt to move from the periphery of a system to its center. That is, movements are conscious efforts on the part of men to mitigate their deprivation and secure justice. Movements emerge when men committed to a specified set of goals participate in protest-oriented, purposive collective actions. Therefore, its crucial aspects are mobilisation and institutionalization.”<sup>32</sup>

Peasant mobilisation is goal oriented and have sustained over centuries in fighting deprivation and injustice. This has brought peasant mobilisation as a more sustained and collective effort to bring the desired changes in their economic and social conditions. The study of peasant mobilisation proceeds from understanding the class/caste character, autonomy of the peasant consciousness, organisational and leadership abilities, scale of operation, contextual understanding varying from region to region. The politics of the masses, modus operandi within or outside the institutional set up also determines the political nature of a peasant movement.

### **1.3. Conceptualizing Peasant Mobilisation**

Conceptualizing the peasantry involves the study of many different theories and approaches, understanding the active politics and the nature of mobilisation to the extent it forms a discourse and identity of its own in the region. There has been a source of deprivation among the peasants, a vacuum which is created by rapid changes in the economic system. The

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<sup>30</sup> See Mukherjee, M. (2004). *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Oomen, T. K. (1977). Sociological Issues in the analysis of Social Movements in Independent India. *Sociological Bulletin*, 26 (1), 14-37.

<sup>32</sup> See Oomen, T. K. (1977). Sociological Issues in the analysis of Social Movements in Independent India. *Sociological Bulletin*, 26 (1), 14-37.

mobilisation of the peasantry, a kind of collective action, is vital in understanding the potentiality and strength of the lot in bringing about change to their existing conditions. Peasants throughout have a seemingly same history, faced with economic deprivation and being at the periphery of the system has triggered large scale mobilisations and movements across the country. The starting point of analysis of any peasant movement is the material condition and deprivation it is subject to and this became a focus of study. The idea of putting peasant struggle into conceptual and theoretical frameworks is to understand the larger discourses which offer insights to locate and study peasant mobilisation within some specific spheres. Understanding these dimensions from specific approaches will help to locate as well as construct peasant struggle in the political, societal and economical structure. The approaches provide an understanding to the nature of the peasant's struggle in terms of the structures of domination, political methods. Sudha Pai identifies three approaches to understand the 'peasantry' and 'peasant movements' in the post-independence period of India which are Marxist, nationalist and subaltern. These three approaches, according to Pai, deal with the nature of the peasantry and the potential for movements.<sup>33</sup> The approaches identified for this study are the Marxist, Subaltern, Nationalist and the Gandhian. These approaches help us understand the peasantry from different contexts, from where they emerge as a resisting force.

**The Marxist Approach-** The Marxist interpretation of history is generally the widely accepted framework for understanding the rising peasant consciousness and systematic exploitation of the peasants by the capitalist system. Marxism gives us a broad understanding of the causes of peasant sufferings, their class position in a society, exploitation and the revolutionary character to bring about the desired change in their material condition. The Marxist theory gives important insights to the nature of political action, societal status and economic exploitation as key to understanding the peasantry. Key to the social, political and economic changes, the peasantry along with the workers has an important part in changing the hierarchical structure of the state. The peasantry has been seen as a means to desired social changes. A subject of exploitation, matter has been an important determining factor for the peasantry.

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<sup>33</sup> Pai, S. (2010). Farmers' Movements. In Jayal & Mehta, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (pp.391-406). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Marxism vividly describes the peasantry in totality, the way peasants have always been a resisting force throughout history. Economic dependence and exploitation, has been the prima facie of peasant resistance all over the world and peasants have taken the Marxist revolutionary route to end their sufferings. V. I. Lenin said that the goal of the peasantry is not only the struggle for land and freedom but ‘against all exploitation of man by man, struggle against the poverty of the masses of the people, against the rule of capital’.<sup>34</sup> The peasantry has a greater and more important goal, the complete abolition of the rule of capital and the rule of socialism. The rule of socialism is where the emancipation of the peasantry, the toiling classes will emerge. The Marxist thinkers have united the peasantry with the working classes which will together work for the common struggle. As Lenin said, “Forward, workers and peasants, in the common struggle for land and freedom! Forward, proletarians, united by international Social-Democracy, in the fight for socialism!”<sup>35</sup> Antonio Gramsci opined that workers and peasants are the two important force of a proletarian revolution. To quote Gramsci, “For the factory workers and poor peasants, communism represents an existential necessity: its coming means life and liberty, the continuation of private property means the inherent danger of being annihilated, of losing everything up to physical life. They are the backbone of revolution.”<sup>36</sup> In the Marxists framework, the peasantry is united with the workers in the common goal towards establishment of communism and overthrowing the capital and the bourgeoisie culture that they have been subjugated to. Gramsci said that the problem of the Italian revolution was the problem of the unity of the peasants and the workers and in a way told the Communists in Italy not to neglect this important aspect of the revolution.<sup>37</sup>

In this Marxian understanding the state has always been an ally of the dominant class throughout history. In the slave owing society, it is the ally of the slave masters; in the feudal society the state is the friend of the landlords and in the capitalist society the state is an ally of the bourgeoisie. The greatest revolutionary struggles of the peasantry and the workers have challenged the capitalist nature of the state, their biggest foe. The essence of understanding peasant mobilisation then involves the ‘state’. Traditionally a movement in

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<sup>34</sup> Accessed <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/12.htm> on 02.02.2018.

<sup>35</sup> Accessed <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/12.htm> on 02.02.2018.

<sup>36</sup> Accessed <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1919/08/workers-peasants.htm> on 02.02.2018.

<sup>37</sup> Accessed [https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1921/08/agrarian\\_struggle.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1921/08/agrarian_struggle.htm) on 02.02.2018.

order to be qualified as a peasant movement directly involved peasant issues. The Tebhaga, Telangana and the Naxalite movements went beyond law and order situation of the state and thereby questioning the legitimacy of the established order.<sup>38</sup> In the modern era, Sudha Pai notes that the state policies have been major shifts in the agrarian and rural economy, thus leading to 'Farmers' movements'. To quote Pai, "Most of the farmers' movements are either against particular state policies or make demands that the state cannot ignore".<sup>39</sup> The state therefore assumes a pivotal role in understanding the dynamics of a peasant movement. Generally a peasant movement centers round economic and societal issues but gradually develops into a political one when it is confronted with the political apparatus of the state.

Marxist framework for understanding peasant mobilisation therefore, helps in determining-

- 1) reasons and nature of exploitation of the peasantry;
- 2) revolutionary struggle
- 3) nature of the state;
- 4) class consciousness of the peasantry (the hierarchy in the socio-economic order)
- 5) class relations in a society or the hierarchical structure of the state; and
- 6) the role of capital or capitalism in totality.

The peasant in India and elsewhere has been a resisting category, defined by economic backwardness and exploitation. Throughout history, we have witnessed peasant mobilisation as related to some relative deprivation, economic exploitation of the peasantry. Karl Marx's historical analysis of the stages of society marks the peasant society as the third stage of evolution from serfdom. The dissolution of the peasant society leads to a capitalist society according to Karl Marx. History shows that peasants have continuously been exploited and hence to strive for better livelihood and economic conditions was a defining criteria of their existence. Matter, thus play an important role in understanding the peasant as a whole. Peasants have been revolutionary, primarily because of the economic conditions. Such

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<sup>38</sup> Singharoy, K. D. (2004). *Peasant's Movement in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilisation and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> Sudha Pai understands the typologies of movements in the post independence era of India, discussing significant farmers' movements that fall within these typologies. Pai, S. (2010). Farmers' Movements. In Jayal & Mehta, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (pp.391-406). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.



peasant movements like the Tebhaga Movement in Bengal, the Telangana Movement in Andhra Pradesh, the Naxalite Movement in Bengal were all driven by extreme forms of economic exploitation.

**The Subaltern Approach-** The subaltern approach broadly represents the politics of the masses (people) in movements, which is totally independent and not influenced by elite politics. This subaltern group which forms a large number of masses of the population is an important category in understanding the group in totality. This approach puts emphasis on the subaltern section of the society, the peasants who have been excluded from the state's established institutions and thus denied the means by which they have a voice in the society. The subaltern approach is important to understand the political role of the mass peasants who constitutes the mass number of people who are at the margins of the society. To see peasants as agents of social change, their politics, their methods of asserting demands represents an independent agent that drive their own course of politics. Ranajit Guha, the pioneer of subaltern studies have presented the whole idea of 'autonomy' of peasant (subaltern) consciousness and identified six forms or ideas of rebel consciousness viz. negation, ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission and territoriality in the colonial period by refuting the claim that the elite played a part in building Indian nationalism.<sup>40</sup> For Guha, it was the peasantry who contributed on their own, independent of the elite. The critics of the subaltern approach have questioned the very autonomy of peasant consciousness. Dhangare have pointed out that subaltern consciousness can only be studied in insurgent movements.<sup>41</sup> While the peasant consciousness has been viewed as autonomous, it undermines the importance of organisation and leadership in mass peasant movements. The subaltern approach also helps to understand to what extent there is the autonomy of peasant consciousness.

**The Gandhian Approach-** Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a campaigner of major peasant revolts that erupted during the colonial rule. The Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 which was launched by Gandhi in the Champaran district of Bihar against the injustice meted

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<sup>40</sup> Guha, R. (1999). *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. London: Duke University Press.

<sup>41</sup> Dhanagare, D. N. (1988). Subaltern Consciousness and Populism: Two Approaches in the study of Social Movements in India. *Social Scientists*, 16 (11), 18-35.

out to the peasant through forced cultivation of *indigo* by the British. Gandhi held the first civil disobedience movement at Champaran against the forcible cultivation of indigo against the peasant's wishes. The Kheda satyagraha of 1918, was another peasant resistance organised by Gandhi to support the peasants of Kheda district of Gujarat. Excessive tax levied on the peasants of Kheda by the British following which the peasants were unable to pay as a result of the famine made Gandhi launch the Satyagraha movement at Kheda. Gandhi provided a way and a method to civil resistance to the peasants of Champaran and Kheda, by peacefully resisting the British, nonviolence being the divine weapon. Peasant mobilisation in an organised and united level in India was formed under Gandhi's leadership in the nationalist struggle. The peasants were for the first time united under the umbrella organisation, the Indian National Congress, who played a vital and active role in the anti-British upsurge. The Gandhian approach provides the very key tool to analyze peasant studies of India in terms of the modes and techniques of resistance. Gandhi was a key figure in the history of colonial struggle, where the peasants were mobilised at large to form a potent force of resistance against the colonial powers. The peasants, were not only a part of the mobilisation against colonial powers, they also occupied a supreme place in building a Gandhian idea of village.

The Gandhian approach has been important to understand the village India, a larger socio-economic thought of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Gandhi propounded an economic theory with the 'village' in its centrality. Gandhi in his autobiography wrote, "The life of a labour, that is, the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living."<sup>42</sup> Gandhi constructed an ideal structure of the village society, making it strong, self-sufficient and dignified. His idea of 'swaraj' or 'rule of the self' could be attained, only when there is economic independence. Gandhi regarded the 'village' and the 'rural' as pivotal to India's development and progress. The village, Gandhi considered, was an embodiment to truth and progress. The peasants, artisans, and the vast number of people who are a part of the village economy were important in Gandhi's constructivist programme.

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<sup>42</sup> Gandhi, M. K. (1927). *An Autobiography or the Story of my Experiments With Truth*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, p. 221

Gandhi constructed his own very 'village republic'; where economic self-sufficiency, equity and prosperity would follow. His ideas of decentralization, panchayati raj, revival of khadi and village industries were all embedded in making the rural the center of India's path towards development. For Gandhi, the village was the epicenter of India and its development. In understanding the rural India from Gandhian lens, gives insight to three distinct ideas to comprehend the village and the peasantry.

- 1) Towards a strong village centered economy. This was to help build the peasantry and the rural India economically sound;
- 2) Methods of resistance;
- 3) Indigeneity of Indian culture rooted in village India.

The village, along with its people has been an important constituent of Gandhi's constructivist programme. Gandhi gave a systematic direction to peasant resistance, peasant economy and the very indigeneity of Indian culture rooted in the village. But studies of peasant mobilisation from Gandhian lens have taken only two routes; the first is the Gandhian method of civil resistance and the second is the politicization of the peasantry during the nationalist struggle of India. Gandhi was one of the first to assert vivid peasantry and working class culture of rural India and an independent village India comprising of the rural artisans and the peasants forward. His exemplary of khadi and village industries in India was driven by his ideas for a self-sufficient, independent rural India. Gandhian framework, then involves not only peasant's method of resistance but also establishing a relation with the peasant economy and society in the process.

**The Nationalist Approach-** National consciousness has been a prime factor of major peasant revolts throughout centuries. The participation of masses of Indian peasants in the struggle for independence was driven more by the national aspirations. The routine exploitation was seen as anti-nationalist and against the interests of masses. Nationalism has been an ideology, a binding force for the masses and the peasants to unite.

Nationalism is an ideology employed from many perspectives- as inherent or something inculcated. The Subaltern approach has tried to understand the peasant nationalism as

autonomous in its existence, it is self realized. On the other hand there is a view that the nationalist consciousness of the peasantry is result of the subjective factors, like the organisation, leadership which played an important role. Mridula Mukherjee notes that the subaltern approach tried to undermine the national movement led by the Indian National Congress and its leadership. Mukherjee however says, “the ideology of class or economic struggle had no chance of success if it ranged itself against nationalism”.<sup>43</sup> If that is so, does nationalistic sentiments is a must for every movement or rebellion? No doubt, nationalism has emerged as the strongest driving force and an enduring factor for many revolutions of the world. The Chinese revolution, Russian revolution were all united not only by class factor but also a strong sense of nationalism. Infact the nationalism is strongly driven by some shared identity among a group of people that can lead to united efforts to realize the same.

#### **1.4. Peasant Dynamics and Trends in India**

The peasantry in India has been mobilised on three main grounds

1) In the nationalist struggle, peasants were mobilised by many political parties, to launch a united struggle against the British. The imposition of the Zamindari system, perpetuated rising class inequalities and hierarchies in the society. The Indian National Congress started involving the peasantry in nationalist movements in order to start as a mass-based party.<sup>44</sup> Ghanshyam Shah says the Indian National Congress was interested only at mobilizing the peasants for staging a movement against the British and not at movements which sharpened the struggle and conflict against the landlords.<sup>45</sup> It was more of a nationalist struggle rather than aiming at the reformation<sup>46</sup> of existing peasant issues and ‘peasant struggles’<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Mukherjee, M. (2004). *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 318.

<sup>44</sup>See Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 68. The book by Shah is actually an extension of literature on different social movements in India.

<sup>45</sup> See Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 69.

<sup>46</sup> M. S. A. Rao identify three kinds of movements viz. Reform movements which aim at partial changes in the value system, Transformative movements aiming at structural changes and Revolutionary movements which aim at radical changes in the society and economy. This has been quoted from Oommen, T. K. (2010). *Social Movements I: Issues of Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gyanendra Pandey observes that ‘the Congress leaders in Uttar Pradesh were of the view that the sectional struggles led by the tenants and peasants against landlords were hindering the ‘larger’ struggle which called for ‘national unity’.<sup>48</sup> The peasants were a part of the process of the larger nationalist struggle, since the peasantry represented the vast majority of the Indian population. During the colonial period, the peasant struggle was spearheaded by Sahajanand Saraswati against the Zamindari system of revenue sparked the peasant movement in India which intensified across the country and culminated in the formation of the All India Kisan Sabha in India.

2) In the post-independence period, one can see the trend of peasants mobilised by left political parties and many affiliated (to political parties) or independent peasant organisations. There was a ‘renewed phase of peasant mobilisation’<sup>49</sup> by the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI). There was the rise of institutional peasant politics. Infact what was witnessed was the affiliation of a number of peasant organisation affiliated to parliamentary political parties. There were no or hardly independent peasant organisations and the peasant wings of these parties were more or less engaged in reforming or overthrowing the colonial policies that was still prevalent in the post-colonial era. Many peasant organisations were formed under parliamentary political parties which worked for the peasants. It was then there emerged an organised forum for peasant issues and grievances. The peasant wings, Krishak Banua Panchayat (KBP) of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India and the Krishak Sabha of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Peasants in India are mobilised by various peasant organisations, either affiliated to the parliamentary political parties or independent ones. Peasants join these organisations for it aims at basic peasant issues as its main objective and area of operation. These organisations have worked for the rights of the peasants. Peasants resist and revolt following their own course of struggle, throughout history. However, peasants have been

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<sup>47</sup> The term ‘peasant struggles’ was used by A. R. Desai while referring to the struggles of the colonial period, whereas the struggles of the post-independence era was referred as ‘agrarian struggles’. Agrarian struggles for Desai included not only poor peasants but also the movements launched by the newly emerging proprietary classes, middle peasants and the agrarian poor. See Desai, A. R. (1986). *Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>48</sup> See Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p.69.

<sup>49</sup> Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India, p. 207.

mobilised (by organisations and political parties) not to improve their economic conditions but for the political gains of those who mobilise. Often, do we see, the wide gap that persists between the economic outcomes and political gains, the former clearly lagging behind.<sup>50</sup> On peasants joining the Kisan Sabha after independence, E M S Namboodiripad noted, “the emergence of the Kisan Sabha showed that the mass of the Indian peasantry who had fought the British rulers, first under the dethroned feudal chieftains and the under the bourgeois leaders of the anti-imperialist movement, had begun to search for new allies while organizing themselves independently but as a part of the anti-imperialist movement.” Peasant mobilisation in the post-colonial period has been largely on democratic ethos confined mainly to working under peasant based organisations which aims to work for the peasants. A.N. Seth classifies three major patterns of peasant organisations in India viz.

- (i) Organisations comprised mainly of peasants and working for the fulfillment of peasant needs;
- (ii) Community organisations and cooperatives in which peasants also participate; and
- (iii) Voluntary organisations working for the welfare of peasants or sections thereof but not comprised of peasants.<sup>51</sup>

Some of the organisations were formed prior to independence like the All India Kisan Sabha in 1936, All Indian Agricultural Labour Union, Bharatiya Kisan Sangh in 1979.<sup>52</sup>

3) The third kind of peasant mobilisation has been the radical form, which emerged as a result of the loss of hope in the institutional and parliamentary structure of the country. This nature of peasant mobilisation adopted revolutionary means to realize its goal of freedom from exploitation and bondage. Peasant resistance in India often has taken revolutionary route in the form of a prolonged movement or an armed resistance. Drawn mainly from

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<sup>50</sup> This argument has been made by Ashutosh Varshney where Varshney analyses as to why economic outcomes for the countryside lag behind the political gains made by it. Varshney makes a study of the rising power of the peasantry, which have acquired substantial power since independence. Varshney, A. (1995). *Democracy, Development and the countryside: Urban-rural struggles in India*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>51</sup> Seth, A. N. (1984). *Peasant Organisations in India*. New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, p. xxxii.

<sup>52</sup> The All India Kisan Sabha was encouraged by Nehru with Jaiprakash Narayan and N. G. Ranga as its conveners. The Sabha was supported by the Leftist elements within the Indian National Congress. Ibid, pp. 18-19.

Marxist theories and ideologies, the peasantry in India and elsewhere with able leadership has taken the prescribed route, to overthrow the system which was/are responsible for their condition. The peasantry in China under Mao-Zhe-Dang took the guerilla revolutionary form and established a new constitution. The Naxalbari movement in West Bengal is another example where peasants emerged as a revolutionary force with the loss of hope and faith in the institutional structure of India.

The revolutionary route has often been criticized not only because it is outside the constitutional ethics of our country, but also it challenges the authority of the state. This signaled counter remedies on the part of the state to subdue such peasant resistance. The state then becomes an active agent not only in bringing about changes in the lives of the peasant but also shaping their course of action.

The patterns of mobilisation depict the nature of the peasantry as a 'struggling lot'. An interesting fact that has emerged as we scan the history of peasant mobilisation is the very element of struggle that has been present. Peasants gathered, mobilised, resisted, took arms, revolted because they have been exploited at some point of history. The struggle of the peasants have been manifold; starting from their rights to land, resources, decent wages, failure of crops, high rates of revenue, bonded labour, landlordism and many. The struggle of all the peasants, at all points of history is however economical in nature. J. Craig. Jenkins writes, "Peasants rebel because of threats to their access to an economic subsistence, not because of the particular form of class relations in which they are enmeshed."<sup>53</sup> What Jenkins misses out that it is the class relations that poses a threat to their economic subsistence. Surinder S. Jodhka explores how debt and credit play an important role in the reproduction of dependency relationships in agrarian structures.<sup>54</sup> Jacques Pouchepadass is of the opinion that it is impossible to understand a peasant movement in the absence of a notion of class structure of the peasantry.<sup>55</sup> For a long time, the conflict of interests or the duality between

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<sup>53</sup>See Jenkins, J. C. (1982). Why do Peasants Rebel? Structural and Historical Theories of Modern Peasant Rebellions. *American Journal Of Sociology*, 88 (3), 487-514.

<sup>54</sup> Jodhka, S. S. (2018). Who Borrows? Who Lends? Changing Structure of Informal Credit in Rural Haryana. In S. S. Jodhka, *A Handbook of Rural India* (pp. 337-359). Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited.

<sup>55</sup> For instance, Pouchepadass makes a study of peasant movements from 1917 to 1950, where in all the cases, it was class which gave impetus to the movements, mainly from the upper strata of the peasantry. See

the landlords and the agricultural labourers dominated the peasant struggle, a distinct feature of the feudal society according to the Marxist interpretation of history. This conflict of interest resulting from economical exploitation, later, led to a struggle of power and interests among the peasants. While Craig argues 'class relations' may not be a sufficient condition for peasant's struggle, it is the access to an economic subsistence that may be the cause of rebellion. Matter, has been important in determining the peasant's course of action. The traditional feudal society was marked by extreme form of exploitation of the toiling peasants by the landlords. James C. Scott explores that exploitation is a necessary cause for rebellion but may not be a sufficient cause for it. For Scott, the structural context of revolt in terms of the structural vulnerability of the peasantry; the paths of survival and non revolt of the peasants and the anatomy of repression which is related to the coercive power of the state are the conditions which can increase the likelihood of peasant revolts as well as decrease the same when combined with exploitation.<sup>56</sup> Even Barrington Moore observes that material changes like food, shelter, clothing do not infuriates the peasantry as much as a 'new and sudden imposition or demand that strikes many people at once' which is a break from the accepted rules and customs.<sup>57</sup> It seems, there exists a whole lot of factors that drives peasant revolts and delineating it as an outcome of only economic exploitation would be to oversee the other complex contextual factors. James C. Scott identifies that the peasantry revolts because of the threat to their subsistence; the increasing pressure on the land, growing market, commercialization of agrarian structure, rainfall, peasant culture, folklore are some of the factors identified which poses a threat to their subsistence. In short, Scott have argued that peasant have often revolted to meet their moral obligations than to destroy elites.<sup>58</sup> True to the fact that peasant revolts can never be directly related to exploitation by the elites, the change in history and the advent of globalisation poses a whole new threat to subsistence which is purely economic in nature.

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Pouchepadass, J. (1980). Peasant Classes in the Twentieth Century Agrarian Movements in India. In Hobsbawm, Kula, Mitra, Raj & Sachs, *Peasants in History. Essays in Honour of Daniel Thorner* (pp. 136-155). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>56</sup> Scott, J. C. (1976). *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. London: Yale University Press, pp. 193- 240.

<sup>57</sup> Moore, B. (1967). *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. London: Allen Lane, p. 474.

<sup>58</sup> Scott, J. C. (1976). *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. London: Yale University Press, pp. 193- 240.



## The Indian state and the peasantry

The Indian state, for that instance has treated the peasantry differently at different periods of time. The colonial state viewed the peasantry as mere producers and sources of revenue. The nationalist struggle brought the peasantry to the forefront as a united force against the colonizers under the leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.<sup>59</sup> The immediate post-independence period witnessed the primacy given to agriculture in the first five year plan (1951-56), which was immediately withdrawn in the second five year plan of India (1956-61). Jawaharlal Nehru viewed 'development planning' as instrumental in bringing about changes in the traditional society of India. The 'rural' had little place for Nehru's development agenda, his immediate concern being the rapid industrialization under the state control. The Nehruvian state oriented towards industrialization as the path towards the nation's development, weakened the already weakening agricultural sector. The reforms that were initiated in the agricultural sector were oriented not at changing the hierarchies of the agricultural sector but to boost agricultural production keeping in view the deteriorating condition of the Indian economy. The green revolution of 1960s was confined to few wealthy states of India. A new class of capitalist farmers emerged in the agrarian society dominating the relations of productions.<sup>60</sup> Even high agricultural productivity was marked by inequalities in the country and among the region giving rise to new classes. The green revolution, abolition of Zamindari system has little contribution to improving the agrarian condition. While green revolution led to increasing inequalities and regional imbalances, abolition of the Zamindari system couldn't improve the condition of the agricultural labourers, nor the rising inequality. There was a polarization of the rural, with increasing class differences which segmented the society. Liberalisation of the economy and the discourse of the market growth of capitalism have evolved in a patterned manner which has given rise to insecurity and discontent among the peasants gradually. The struggle of the peasantry throughout, have been constant, in terms of their land rights to adequate wages, to adequate sustainability in the agricultural market. This continuous struggle has often led to mobilisations to voice and fight for their rights and secured livelihood. Debal K. SinghaRoy notes that, "Though the

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<sup>59</sup> See Mukherjee, M. (2004). *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publications

<sup>60</sup> See Friese, K. (1990). Peasant Communities and Agrarian Capitalism. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 (39), A135-A143.

peasant societies in India are undergoing a process of rapid transformation, their social and economic oppression and domination by the ‘others’ continues unabated in one form or the other”.<sup>61</sup> The extreme forms of subordination, oppression and exploitation in the society is central to its idea of struggle and hence peasants have been a resisting force. The modern nation (in terms of its operational institutions and colonial bureaucracy) views the peasant as suitable producers for a market. In India, while landlordism still prevails, the advent of globalisation has made the peasant as just an ‘important producer’. Economic subsistence has been present, where the nature of it has been changing at periods of history; subsistence slowly turning to insecurities.

The agrarian structure has undergone changes from time to time, owing to which it created unrest in the agrarian society of the country. It is not only the change in the agrarian structure that gives rise to peasant resistance but also the nature of the state at large. Sudha Pai has pointed two determining factors of the rising farmer’s movement in India. Firstly, it is the ‘centrality of the state’ which assumes a primary role in shaping agricultural policies and secondly, the increasing ‘capitalist tendency’ in agriculture which facilitates increasing mobilisation in the agricultural sector.<sup>62</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj too points out the crucial role of the ‘state’ in controlling the consequences of globalisation, which is in a continuous process of historical transformation.<sup>63</sup>

The state since colonial times have been an active participant in peasant affairs, their lives revolved round the state. The colonial state introduced Zamindari, Mahalwari and Ryotwari system in India where the affairs of the peasant came to be directly regulated by the state. Economic exploitation of the peasants became rampant under the colonial state. The state policies, societal norms, regional culture and the nature of the state have conditioned the peasantry at large. Peasants have always confronted the state, the state being the agency

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<sup>61</sup> Singharoy, K. D. (2004). *Peasant’s Movement in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilisation and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

<sup>62</sup> Pai, S. (2010). Farmers’ Movements. In Jayal & Mehta, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (pp.391-408). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>63</sup> Infact Kaviraj argues further that the state has emerged successful by benefitting itself from the extreme trade flows through the processes of globalisation. it is only because the state has been pivotal in bringing out reforms and the state has emerged more powerful in the process. See Kaviraj, S. (2010). Nationalism. In Jayal & Mehta, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (pp.391-408). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

towards the deteriorating conditions of peasants. The many kinds of peasant protests and mobilisation that have been witnessed since the colonial state, continues till date. The state's approach at capitalizing agriculture and innovating new methods for greater production was signaled as the only way to revive the rural sector of the economy.

Contemporary period witnesses a massive increase of cross border trade, communication, exchange of services, with the shrinking of space and making the rural-urban meet. This facilitates the urban more access to the countryside with many new developments; economic, social, political and cultural. The introduction of liberal reforms in the Indian economy in 1991 by the then Finance Minister, Manmohan Singh, has changed major structures of the state and the agrarian society. The state being an active player in bringing and regulating the market has always an important to play. Baldev Raj Nayar argues how the state has been pivotal in regulating the market, setting the rules of the game and enforcing compliance. State and market both go hand in hand and it is impossible to think of one without the other. To quote Nayar, "A strong state remains a pre-requisite for a strong market."<sup>64</sup> All the major peasant movements and mobilisation have aimed the state, as its contender. The state control over the economy, in the contemporary period of markets and *bazaars*, shows the nature of the state, capitalist in nature. The peasantry, in the era of globalisation has mobilised primarily against the state at large. Their expectation on behalf of the state, keeps the state in the forefront. So, understanding contemporary peasant mobilisation also includes, 1) the extent to which globalisation and free market have affected them and 2) the way state has been an active agent in regulating the market. This, then requires studying both the state and the market, one being directly related to the other. The worries, plight, resistance, course of action, all depends on the nature of the state at large. Agrarian unrest resulting from inequality of income, status, rights, opportunities; economic disparities has taken a new form with the change of the agrarian system. Eric Wolf depicts that the rapid increase of the

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<sup>64</sup> See Nayar, B. R. (2001). *Globalisation and Nationalism: The Changing Balance in India's Economic Policy, 1950-2000*. New Delhi: Sage Publication, p. 265. Nayar gives an elaborate explanation regarding the nature of the state, and how the state has been an important agent in bringing all the major reforms of India's Economic Policy since the 1950s. Nayar particularly talks of economic globalisation, where the central issue involves the role of the state and the market. The emergence of the market doesnot implies the retreat of the state, Nayar argues. The state, infact, plays an important role in giving legitimacy to the market, since the market cannot operate on its own. See Nayar, B. R. (2001). *Globalisation and Nationalism. The Changing Balance in India's Economic Policy, 1950-2000*. New Delhi: Sage Publication

commercial market, destroys the economic security of the peasantry, thereby stimulating rebellions.<sup>65</sup>

Another important cause of peasant rebellions, Jenkins suggests, is the increase of rural population, which as a result reduces the amount of landholdings of peasants causing competition, also creating a situation of unemployment. Neo Marxists interpretations on the recent neo-liberal era have focused on technological dominations of the West, dependence of the developing countries, capitalist expansions and repercussions of cross-border trade. For Lenin, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia, peasants were differentiated not only by their size of landholdings and income but also by their contact with the market.<sup>66</sup> Different classes of peasantry exist at different periods of history. In the wake of global capital economy, there has been the dissolution of self-sufficient peasant economy leading to growing landlessness and indebtedness. India, a colonized and a developing economy with fast advancing global capitalism with the absence of revolutionary potential among the peasantries in India as stated by Barrington Moore,<sup>67</sup> puts the peasantry in a different position to comprehend.

Karl Marx had no hopes from the peasantry which was an unformed mass in bringing a revolution and called them 'a sack of potatoes'.<sup>68</sup> Karl Marx doubted the revolutionary potential of the peasantry who cannot form a class of their own and hence must be represented. Eric Wolf, Hamza Alavi, Barrington Moore Junior too doubts the revolutionary potential of the poor peasants and the rural proletariat since they depend on the landlords for their economic subsistence. Moore has described the Indian peasant as 'passive' and 'docile' and has questioned the revolutionary potential of the Indian peasantry.<sup>69</sup> For Wolf and Alavi, the middle peasants have the potential of starting a movement, since they are not dependent or aided by the rich landlords.<sup>70</sup> Hamza Alavi characterizes three different classes of the

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<sup>65</sup>See Jenkins, J. C. (1982). Why do Peasants Rebel? Structural and Historical Theories of Modern Peasant Rebellions. *American Journal Of Sociology*, 88 (3), 487-514.

<sup>66</sup> Singharoy, K. D. (2004). *Peasant's Movement in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilisation and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 19

<sup>67</sup> Barrington Moore has described the Indian peasantry as passive and docile and has questioned its revolutionary potential. See Moore, B. (1967). *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. London: Allen Lane.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted from Hobsbawm, E. J. (1973). Peasants and Politics. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1 (1), 3-22.

<sup>69</sup> See Moore, B. (1967). *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. London: Allen Lane.

<sup>70</sup> See Pouchepadass, J. (1980). Peasant Classes in the Twentieth Century Agrarian Movements in India. In Hobsbawm, Kula, Mitra, Raj & Sachs, *Peasants in History. Essays in Honour of Daniel Thorner* (pp. 136-155). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

peasantry- the rich owners of the land who do not cultivate their own lands; the landless tenants who cultivate the land owned by the landlords and the independent small landholders who cultivate their own lands and are self-sufficient. These independent small landholders or the middle peasants do not ‘exploit the labour of others nor is their labour exploited’<sup>71</sup>. While making a distinction between the middle peasants and the rich peasants who live primarily on the exploitation of the wage labour of the landless or the poor peasants, Alavi argues that because of the economic independence, the middle peasants have the potential of starting a revolution unlike the poor peasants who are economically dependent on the landlords.<sup>72</sup> Eric Wolf has also opined that the poor peasantry and the rural proletariat who depend on the landlord do not possess enough material security to turn against the landlords. For Wolf, it is the middle peasants who generally have the potential to rebel because of his secured tenure and are militant in nature.<sup>73</sup> Many scholars have thus questioned the revolutionary potential of the poor peasants who are dependent on the landlords and have presented different class analysis within the peasantry itself.

The many class dimensions of the peasantry have thus, over the history, acquired prominence in many peasant studies across.

### **1.5. Understanding the Peasantry in Assam**

The history of peasant mobilisation in Assam is important to understand the peasant society as well as the changes that the peasantry has undergone from time to time. To understand the nature of the peasant society in Assam, it is important to understand the history of the peasantry, their struggle, courses of mobilisation that gives a structural explanation to the peasant society at large. The history regarding the organisation, structure, forms of

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<sup>71</sup> See Alavi, H. (1973). Peasant classes and Primordial loyalties. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1 (1), 23-62. Also See Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 55.

<sup>72</sup> Hamza Alavi further argues that the mode of production of the rich peasants is capitalist farming while that of the poor peasants is sharecropping. See Alavi, H. (1973). Peasant classes and Primordial loyalties. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1 (1), 23-62.

<sup>73</sup> Eric Wolf presents his theory by studying the five major peasant wars- the revolutions of Mexico, the Algerian war of independence, the Russian revolutions in the rural, the Chinese and the Vietnam war. See Pouchepadass, J. (1980). Peasant Classes in the Twentieth Century Agrarian Movements in India. In Hobsbawm, Kula, Mitra, Raj & Sachs, *Peasants in History. Essays in Honour of Daniel Thorner* (pp. 136-155). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

mobilisation of the peasantry can be traced from the pre colonial period, which is during the medieval period of Ahom aristocracy in the region.

The Ahom kingdom<sup>74</sup> (1228-1826) which ruled Assam for nearly six centuries patronized a different agrarian system. The Ahom revenue system, known as the *Khel* system where the entire male population was divided into guilds or khels based on their occupations. A Khel consisted of Paiks and three or four paiks formed a Got. The paiks were simple peasant cultivators who didn't possess paddy lands. Under the Ahom kingdom, it was the monarch, the chiefs, the nobility and the priests who owned the cultivable land and which was cultivated by the paiks. Every paik was required to render essential service to the state in lieu of which received around 2 puras or 3 acres of cultivable land from the state. So in return of the cultivable land, the paiks were obliged to serve the state. Monirul Hussain notes that the paiks which constituted the major militiamen, artisans, fishermen were the largest class in the pre-colonial Assam.<sup>75</sup> Monirul Hussain notes-

*'The Ahom state did not have a regular paid army. Its militia system, comprised the men drawn mainly from the non-ruling classes and non-slaves, that is paiks, the militiamen-cum-peasants. The paiks used to fight as militiamen to expand and defend the Ahom territory during war. At the time of peace their service was utilized for public works such as roads and bridge building, vassal building, temple building, embankment building besides the fisheries, forests and mines.'*<sup>76</sup>

The Ahoms had devised a revenue system which was unique in its application. The British annexed Assam through the Treaty of Yandaboo,<sup>77</sup> signed between the East India Company and the Burmese on 24<sup>th</sup> February, 1826. The treaty brought an end to Ahom aristocracy and

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<sup>74</sup> The Ahom Kingdom was established by Sukapha, a Tai prince from Mong Mao in China who entered the Brahmaputra valley crossing the Patkai mountain range. The Ahoms came to Assam in early thirteenth century. It ruled for nearly six centuries until the British annexed the region by the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. It may also be noted that the Ahom kingdom has its jurisdiction in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam.

<sup>75</sup> Hussain, M. (1993). *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*. New Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd, p. 33.

<sup>76</sup> See Hussain, M. (1993). *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*. New Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd, p. 33. However Hussain notes that the paik system was an institutionalized system of slavery which was different from classical slavery or the classical system of feudalism. The state was the owner of the slaves in the Ahom state.

<sup>77</sup> Yandaboo is a village in Central Burma. The treaty of Yandaboo was hence named because it was signed at Yandaboo.

Assam was ceded to the British. Tea was discovered in Upper Assam in 1823 by Robert Bruce before Assam came under the colonial occupation of the British. Eventually the Assam Tea Company was established in 1839 and Assam tea found its market in London. This sudden industrialization and rapid trade and commerce of Assam tea required permanent labour to work in the fields.<sup>78</sup> This signaled large scale migration in the form of indentured labour from Central India which changed the demography and the agrarian economy in the region. The tea culture eventually changed the entire agrarian system of Assam. Not only was there large scale indentured migration, it was the starting of the Assam Tea Company that land revenues were increased to flush out the poor peasants from their villages and to work on the tea plantations.<sup>79</sup> Rapid commercialization took place in the region which until 5 years back was a traditional agrarian system. The demography also changed for Muslims of Bengali descent, Hindu Bengalis, the Marwaris and the Nepalis migrated to the region in large scale.<sup>80</sup> Excessive pressure on the land in East Bengal pushed the landless poor peasants to migrate to Assam. Land was also in abundance in Assam. The Hindu Bengalis from Cachar, the Marwaris and the Nepalis were in search of urban jobs, trade and commerce and small and petty jobs. Because of large scale migration, indigenous peasants started feeling alienated from their own lands as a result of migration, commercialization of agriculture and indebtedness.<sup>81</sup> This caused rural distress which changed the earlier agrarian system which the Ahoms has patronized. The peasants were not used to the increased rates of revenue in pre-colonial Assam and this led to rapid alienation of land. The colonial system was adverse to indigenous peasants of Assam which changed and commercialized the entire agrarian system causing distress among the rural lot. The colonial state introduced the

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<sup>78</sup> It may be noted that initially the Britishers had employed some Kachari people in the tea gardens. But the Kacharis could work for only a particular season since they were peasants. The Britishers required some permanent labourers to work in the tea gardens and hence welcomed large scale migration from Central India.

<sup>79</sup> See Guha, A. (2006). *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> Sanjib Baruah states that in colonial Assam, immigrants such as 'tea labour community', Muslims of Bengali descent, Hindu Bengalis, Marwaris and the Nepalis came to the region and changed the demographic composition. Immigration to Assam was largely a colonial conquest for Baruah. The colonizers saw Assam as a land of abundance and so pursued policies that facilitated immigration from other regions. See Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 44-68.

<sup>81</sup> Saikia, A. & Das, D. (2011). Early Twentieth Century Agrarian Assam: A Brief and Preliminary Overview. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (41), 73-80.

Ryotwari system in the Brahmaputra valley, where Zamindari system was retained in the Goalpara district of the valley.

The colonial rulers changed the traditional agrarian system in significant ways. The colonizers monetized the revenue system which caused distress among the rural lot where the people of Assam were not used to paying revenue in the form of money. Apart from monetizing the revenues the Britishers tried to extract revenue from items of day-to-day use and also imposed *Jalkar* or water tax for fishing in the river and ponds, taxes for grazing cattles (*Khusary*), taxes for cutting timber (*Gorkhati*).<sup>82</sup> A new land law came into effect in 1886 namely the Land and Revenue Regulation Act. During 1867, land revenue rates were increased by 100% and by another 53% in 1892.<sup>83</sup> Apart from the increased rates of land revenue, with the advent of colonial rulers, commercial cultivation like tea, jute opium etc gained more importance because they brought higher revenue in the market. As a result, the traditional agrarian system of rice cultivation faced a crisis.<sup>84</sup>

Distinctive peasant mobilisation in Assam can be traced to two major uprisings during the colonial period. The excessive revenue system introduced by the British Government in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to peasant uprisings in Nagaon district and Darrang district of undivided Assam<sup>85</sup>. The taxation included grazing tax, taxes on opium, bamboo, wood and every item of regular use to taxation on cutting woods and grass.<sup>86</sup> *Phulaguri Dhewa* or the ‘*battle of Phulaguri*’ is the first popular movement of Assam led by peasants in 1861. The village of Phulaguri, in Nagaon district too wasn’t spared from the rigorous taxation policy of the British. When the taxation on beetle nuts reached the village, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September, 1861 more than 1000 people of Phulaguri reached the District Commissioner’s office who didn’t

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<sup>82</sup> See Hussain, M. (1993). *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*. New Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd, pp. 39-43.

<sup>83</sup> The rate of land revenue was increased by 300% from 1865 to 1898. Saikia and Das illustrates the way peasants suffered from hardships when land revenues were raised during the colonial period, where the profit of the peasants was meagre because there was immense profitability from the commercial tea cultivation. The percentage of rice cultivation also reduced. Saikia, A. & Das, D. (2011). Early Twentieth Century Agrarian Assam: A Brief and Preliminary Overview. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (41), 73-80.

<sup>84</sup> Saikia, A. & Das, D. (2011). Early Twentieth Century Agrarian Assam: A Brief and Preliminary Overview. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (41), 73-80.

<sup>85</sup> Here undivided Assam refers to major parts of Northeast India which later got independent statehood status in free and independent India like Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1973 and Arunachal Pradesh in 1987.

<sup>86</sup> Accessed from [http://www.archive.cpiml.org/liberation/year\\_2011/nov\\_11/updates.html\\_on\\_25.11.2018](http://www.archive.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2011/nov_11/updates.html_on_25.11.2018).



comply to the demands of the people and instead fined and detained them for a day. The peasants wanted relief from taxation on items like betel nut trees, *paan*, bamboo, wood etc. The peasants then resolved not to pay taxes and organised *raaij-mels* for greater mobilisation of the peasants. From 15<sup>th</sup> of October to 17<sup>th</sup> of October around 3000-4000 peasants gathered from nearby places, armed with *lathis*. The British administration seeing such large gatherings of peasants, tried to disperse the crowd and eventually because of *lathi* charge and firing led to a hostile situation among the peasants. The peasants turned violent and eventually killed Lieutenant Singer. To control and punish the crowd the British administration fired the crowd which killed 39 people, and later hanged many peasants.

Another such incident on massive hikes on land revenue was the historic '*Patharughator Ran*'. Patharughat is a village located in the Darrang district of Assam. With excessive taxation on items of day-to-day use, there existed unrest among the local population. The peasants of Patharughat have been requesting a ban or a relief from excessive taxation on land. The peasants decided to organise a *raaij-mel* in Patharughat on 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1894 and decided upon not to pay the tax. On 28<sup>th</sup> of January, 1894; more than 1000 people assembled the bungalow of the Deputy Commissioner Anderson. When Anderson refused to comply with the demands of the peasants, it created unrest among the peasants and they tried to move into the Bungalow. The police started *lathi* charge and eventually fired the unarmed crowd. Around 140 peasants were killed by the firing and many more were injured. This incident marked a deep impact on the people and the society of Assam.

The two historic incidents of peasant mobilisation in Assam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century represent the struggle of the peasant over concerns of increased taxation on items of day-to-day use. Where the non-violent, peaceful nature of peasant resistance occurred only after Gandhi entered the scene,<sup>87</sup> peasant protests were largely violent in nature. The two major peasant uprisings were sudden outbursts of the peasants, where peasant mobilisation were not organised and institutionalized, devoid of ideology. Peasant agitation gained ground during the colonial times, its exploitation being the prime cause. Harbans Mukhia has argued that

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<sup>87</sup> This has been argued by Mridula Mukherjee who states that peasant protest took a non-violent turn when Gandhi devised his own political methods of mobilisation the people of India across caste, class religious lines. Mukherjee, M. (2004). *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

the Indian peasantry was devoid of feudalism in the pre-colonial period and that the Indian society at that time was characterized by self-dependent or free peasant production. Mukhia shows a comparative analysis of medieval western Europe and medieval India to prove how feudalism was central to Europe and not India.<sup>88</sup> Sanjib Baruah have argued that it was the colonial state that was largely responsible for the plight of the peasantry with its new policies like the land settlement policy which brought migrants to Assam, thus restricting the traditional land rights.<sup>89</sup> These analyses by scholars have largely blamed the colonial state on the plight of the peasantry.

### **Peasant mobilisation in post colonial Assam**

After independence, there was the increasing ideological awareness or the rise of Communist ideology among the peasants. Communist peasant organisations were on the rise. Though many peasant wings were in existence, it was communism as an ideology which gained ground among peasants. There was a ‘renewed phase of peasant mobilisation’<sup>90</sup> by the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI). The communist leaders in Assam mobilised the peasants in Assam with an aim of securing maximum seats in the Parliament and the Legislative Assembly.<sup>91</sup> Unlike the colonial period, where peasants were mobilised on grounds of nationalism against the colonial aggressor, the post independence witnessed the rise of communism as an ideology. Significantly, there was the rise of institutional peasant politics. Infact what was witnessed was the affiliation of a number of peasant organisation affiliated to parliamentary political parties. There were no or hardly independent peasant organisations and the peasant wings of these parties were more or less engaged in reforming or overthrowing the colonial policies that was still prevalent in the post-colonial era. Many peasant organisations were formed under parliamentary political parties which worked for the peasants. It was then there emerged an organised forum for peasant issues and grievances. The peasant wings, Krishak Banua Panchayat (KBP) of the

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<sup>88</sup> Mukhia, H. (1981). Was there Feudalism in Indian History?. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 8 (3), 273-310.

<sup>89</sup> Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 47.

<sup>90</sup> Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India, p. 207.

<sup>91</sup> Arup Jyoti Saikia notes that in the first election to Assam Legislative Assembly, the Communist Party of India (CPI) contested for 18 seats. It won 1 seat and 13.75 percent of the total votes polled. See Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India, p.246.

Revolutionary Communist Party of India and the Krishak Sabha of the Communist Party of India (CPI) mobilised the peasantry of Assam.

The post colonial history has witnessed a different nature of peasant mobilisation in Assam, with most of the issues centered round land rights, land reforms, abolition of intermediaries, ceiling on landholdings, consolidation of holdings etc. The peasant struggle in the region, as Arupjyoti Saikia notes was primarily against landlordism; sharecropping and usury which generally followed.<sup>92</sup> The Communist political parties tried to mobilise the landless peasants, demanding a decrease in the *adhi*, land to the tiller and other basic rights. The rural crisis prompted the Assam legislative assembly to subsequently enact The Assam Adhiars Protection and Regulation Act, 1948 (as amended in 1952, 1955, 1957 and 1960); Assam (Temporarily Settled Areas) Tenancy Act, 1971; The Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaries Act, 1951; State Acquisition of Land belonging to Religious or Charitable Institutions of Public Nature Act, 1959; Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1956 (as amended in 1971, 1972, 1976); the Assam Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1960. The Assam government also passed the Assam Gramdan Act in 1961 and the Assam Bhoodan Act in 1965 following Acharya Vinoba Bhave's visit to Assam in 1961-62.<sup>93</sup> These acts were brought in to achieve the twin objectives of achieving economic efficiency and social justice.<sup>94</sup> It was also the increasing pressure built on the efficacy of a post colonial state. The need to address peasant issues legally was instrumental in building the edifice of a strong post-colonial state. Peasant protest continued even then, with some taking revolutionary methods of achieving their goals, with the loss of hope in parliamentary ways. But such acts didn't brought immediate relief to peasant grievances, but was more or less a legitimize effort to growing peasant protests. The peasant mobilisation continued, for the adhiars continued facing the increasing threats of eviction. Saikia notes that sharecropping

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<sup>92</sup> Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India. Saikia refers the landlords as the landed gentry of Assam and the peasantry includes the tenants, landless agricultural labourers.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 297. Acharya Vinoba Bhave, a discipline and follower of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and his principles launched the Bhoodan (land gift) Movement in 1951 to persuade the rich landlords donate a part of their land to the landless and poor.

<sup>94</sup> Alam, K. (1989). Land Reforms in Assam- A Tale of Shattered Dream. In P. C. Goswami, *Agriculture in Assam* (pp. 302-314). Guwahati: Assam Institute of Developing Societies.

dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century agrarian struggle in Assam, which continues till today.<sup>95</sup> Till 1947, Assam's rural question was centered on three main issues viz. 1) landlords and the tenants; 2) competition over arable lands and 3) increasing conflict and tension between indigenous people of Assam and migrants.<sup>96</sup> The immigration issue, which continued to dominate the larger politics of ethnicity and regionalism, overshadowed basic peasant issues which continued to loom large at the horizon. Eventually, the landed gentry of Assam continued to wield dominance in the rural scenario of Assam.<sup>97</sup> The agrarian question till today centers on landless peasants according to Saikia.<sup>98</sup> Peasant issues were mainly centered on land rights, abolition of Zamindari system and land ceiling. The Zamindar Abolition Act, Land Ceiling Act, land for the landless peasants, rights of the sharecroppers etc still dominated the scene aftermath independence. The struggle of the small peasants, sharecroppers and the landless peasants continued in Assam after independence. The slogans 'land to the landless'; 'land to the tiller'; 'tini-bhag' (meaning one third of the share); 'chari bhag (one fourth of the share) gained currency.<sup>99</sup> Although there was the rise of peasant organisations or the political parties who tried to mobilise the peasants for their own electoral gain, there were also peasants who acted independently for their share of rights. This was primarily because most of the organisations did not live up to the expectation of the people or were not successful in fighting for their rights. Social justice and economic efficiency are long-desired goals, for peasants are now rooted in many different issues with the passing of decades and the coming of the neo-liberal age.

Scholarship on the peasantry of India has been studied without taking into consideration the peasants of Assam and northeastern region of India. Assam presents a different agrarian history, untouched by green revolution of the 1960s nor a successful or potential peasant movement or revolution. One therefore cannot witness the rise of increased agricultural

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<sup>95</sup> Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India.

<sup>96</sup> Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India, pp. 73-121.

<sup>97</sup> This argument has been put forward by Arupjyoti Saikia, who also points out the important role of the All Assam Students Union in legitimizing the authority of the landed gentry during the Assam Movement. This class of landed gentry constitutes the Assamese nationalists for Saikia. Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India, pp. 73-121.

<sup>98</sup> Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India, p. 328.

<sup>99</sup> Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India.

production and rural economy. Quite clearly, Assam was not within the agricultural revolution that was carried out in some regions of the country.<sup>100</sup> The regional imbalance which was stark left Assam from the highly productive growth regions. The left political parties were not rooted in Assam, and Marxism as an ideology hardly persisted. The communist leaders in Assam mobilised the peasants in Assam with an aim of securing maximum seats in the Parliament and the Legislative Assembly.<sup>101</sup> Unlike the colonial period, where peasants were mobilised on grounds of nationalism against the colonial aggressor, the post independence witnessed the rise of communism as an ideology.

Niru Hazarika notes, “Assam’s backwardness is reflected in its general dependence on primeval agriculture with low productivity, high vulnerability to the onslaught of frequent floods, relative geographical isolation and extremely poor transport and communication facilities. The influx of foreign nationals, mainly from Bangladesh caused a serious socio-political problem in the state.”<sup>102</sup> While this paints a rough picture of the peasantry in Assam, the peasantry is a complex category, its position in the society most often determined by the economic condition. Ghanshyam Shah noted that peasant struggle in Assam are quite few and less comprehensive and hence requires a detailed study.<sup>103</sup> The peasantry in Assam therefore needs special attention and detailed understanding on the matter. The context in Assam has been different from peasant analysis of other regions in India, where there lacks uniformity in understanding the same. At the same time it is also important to note that the Gandhian, Marxist, Subaltern and Nationalist frameworks cannot singularly explain the peasantry and its nature of resistance. It is on this basis that the study of peasant mobilisation in contemporary Assam will be understood under the aegis of KMSS.

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<sup>100</sup> This is not to say that the Green Revolution was responsible for Assam’s sorry state of agrarian affairs. This is just a generalization, following which Assam didn’t gain anything from the revolution.

<sup>101</sup> Arup Jyoti Saikia notes that in the first election to Assam Legislative Assembly, the Communist Party of India (CPI) contested for 18 seats. It won 1 seat and 13.75 percent of the total votes polled. See Saikia, A. (2013). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam since 1900*. New Delhi: Routledge India, p.246.

<sup>102</sup> See Hazarika, N. (1994). Politics in Assam. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 55 (3), 211-220.

<sup>103</sup> Along with Assam, Shah also mentions that the peasant struggle are very few in northeastern states of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. At the same time a large number of literatures are available on Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Malabar. See Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 40.



## Chapter Two

### **The Growth of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti in Assam**

*Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti* (Revolutionary Organisation for Peasant Liberation) was formed on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2005 in Tezpur, Assam, a small town located on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra. With around 12 *lakh* members at present, the organisation operates within the territorial area of Assam. To understand the various issues and factors that led to the birth and growth of KMSS in Assam, it is important to reflect not only the historical junctures but also its activities over the years that resulted in its gradual development. The history of formation of *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti* (henceforth KMSS) is crucial in tracing the birth of the peasant organisation. What is more fundamental is not only the formation but the broader aims and objectives which KMSS cherishes and aims to achieve within the society of Assam. These are important in understanding the gradual rise of the organisation in Assam. The chapter will attempt to understand the rise and growth of KMSS and list out the factors which play an important role for a peasant organisation to disperse in the society, polity and economy of Assam. It also locates peasant struggle in Assam and the way KMSS has been trying to fill up the gap.

Thus, to understand the rise and growth of KMSS in Assam it is instrumental in understanding the needs, necessities, requirements, worries, anxieties and distress of peasants in the society, economy and polity of Assam. What are the peasant grievances and worries that led to the formation of KMSS in Assam? If peasant grievances is the cause or the reason of the rise of KMSS, then the narratives of the former is also important in assessing and determining the rise of the same. At the same time, besides taking into account the reasons and narratives behind involvement of the peasants in the same, to comprehend the gradual rise and growth of the peasant organisation, it is also instrumental to understand the efforts of the organisation over the years that led to its gradual growth. The chapter will be an attempt to understand the growth of KMSS in Assam with the central question- How do we understand the rise and growth of KMSS in Assam? For the sake of clarity, the chapter is divided into four sections. The first section will be a historical narrative of the birth of KMSS

in Assam. The second section will be an insight into the various factors that have contributed to its growth. Here the analysis will be drawn from the objectives/agendas of KMSS it has long engaged with. The third section critically examines the operation of KMSS in terms of its structure and organisational rules. The fourth section of the chapter will try to identify and critically analyze the significant stages of its growth and development. The chapter is an attempt to critically assess the growth of KMSS which can largely be seen as a continuous process rather than some intentional rise which are goal oriented.

## **2.1 The history of the origin and formation of KMSS- The Doyang and Tengani movement**

In the year 2002, the Forest Department of the Government of Assam carried out a mass eviction drive of houses and people occupying forest land. The act of the Assam government to evict the forest dwellers in reserved forests was based on a Supreme Court directive of 1996 on the protection of forest reserves which instructed the states to prevent further encroachment of forest land.<sup>1</sup> In February 2002, the Supreme Court of India issued a directive to the Government of Assam to submit a report on the measures taken to conserve the forests and prevent further encroachment.<sup>2</sup> The newly elected Tarun Gogoi led Congress government in Assam was quick to act on the said directive and immediately carried out a massive eviction drive which was carried out stringently in particular in Doyang and Tengani, located in the Nambor Forest of Golaghat District of Assam. The eviction drive started on 5<sup>th</sup> of June and ended on 12<sup>th</sup> of June, 2002. The people of Doyang and Tengani were the hapless peasants who were left landless by heavy erosion and floods and other economic compulsions who had taken shelter in the Nambor reserved forest on the borders of Assam and Nagaland. Arupjyoti Saikia gives a vivid history of the subsequent ‘peasantisation of the forest land’ of Nambor reserved forest because of continuous waves of migration. The first wave of migration came as a part of the colonization scheme which encouraged the landless peasants to take up some portions of the land which were not commercially viable; the second wave was during the 1950s as a part of the initiative of the

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<sup>1</sup> Saikia, A. (2008). Forest land and Peasant Struggles in Assam, 2002-2007. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 35 (1), 39-59.

<sup>2</sup> Saikia, A. (2008). Forest land and Peasant Struggles in Assam, 2002-2007. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 35 (1), 39-59



left peasant organisations to settle the landless on the forest land and the third wave as argued by Saikia was during the 1970s and the 1980s when landless peasants arrived to settle without any support from the government.<sup>3</sup> The people of Tengani says that the first person to inhabit Tengani was during the days of the British rule in 1838, and their inhabiting the forest land goes back to the colonial era which was almost 2 centuries ago. But it was mostly during the 1960s and the 1970s that the people came to settle and populate the region as gathered from their accounts. Tengani, around 30 kilometers from the Golaghat town of central Assam is located in the Nambor reserved forest. It has been inhabited by peasants and cultivators and today it comprises of 42 villages inhabiting around 50,000 people. One can reach Tengani through the Barpathar road from Golaghat town where the road diverges into the main highway and a narrower muddy road. If one opts the highway one has to reach Tengani via Jamuguri where the roads are good and well built. I took the second road as advised by the locals which was much shorter, crossing the Doyang river on a bridge made of bamboo by the locals. Tengani is a region inhabited by the people of different communities of Assam mostly by the Kaibarta, Kalita, Ahom, Mising and the Adivasi (tea garden labour) community. Except from the Kalita community, all the other communities belong to the backward class, scheduled caste and scheduled tribe constituting a major portion of the population. The people of Tengani engage in agriculture and allied activities, the most common are paddy, tea, poultry and fishery. As narrated by them, the people have been forced to seek settlement in the Tengani forest area because of heavy displacement by frequent floods, erosion and the other natural calamities.

The region Doyang, derived its name from the river Doyang, a tributary of the river Brahmaputra. The river Doyang is the biggest and the longest river which flows from Nagaland near its state boundary where the river suddenly turns westwards and then finally falls in the Dhansiri river of Assam. The Doyang Hydro Project has been constructed on the Doyang river in the Wakho district of Nagaland. The region of Doyang in Assam is 35 kilometers away from the Golaghat town with a total of 126 villages presently. The hills of Nagaland can be seen from the region. The people of Doyang too faced the same fate from the forest department when eviction was carried out strongly. Doyang is a similar region of

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<sup>3</sup> Saikia, A. (2008). Forest land and Peasant Struggles in Assam, 2002-2007. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 35 (1), 39-59. Saikia specifically uses the phrase 'peasantisation of the forest land' in the article.

inter communities residing there for many decades- the most notable are the Bodos, Ahoms, Kacharis, Kaibarta, Mising, Koch, Kalita, Chutias and the Adivasi. The Bodos came in the large groups and settled at the earliest in around 1951-1952. There are a total of eleven (11) panchayats in Doyang, the Bodos having three elected Panchayat bodies solely to themselves. The region of Doyang today is inhabited by around 2 lakh people.<sup>4</sup> Doyang, situated at the border of Nagaland also faced frequent attacks from the people of Nagaland over border issue, where Nagaland has laid its claim on the region as its own. Hiren Gohain notes that it was during the Janata Dal government in 1978 in Assam that the forests were dereserved for the peasants to settle.<sup>5</sup> However the frequent protests by the neighbouring Nagaland made the state clear the forests. Doyang located in the borderland area of Assam and Nagaland, became a frequent site of contestation of inter-state boundary dispute after the state of Nagaland which was carved out of Assam in 1963. The first massive attack from the neighbouring Nagaland was in 1985 as narrated by Dharmeswar Saikia, the founder secretary of Doyang Mukti Sangram Samiti. “My house was burned to ashes 4-5 times by the Nagas. It was in the year 1985 that the Nagas violently attacked us and burnt down houses, granaries and hospitals. Even the CRPF came to handle the situation”, Saikia told.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in addition to land rights like Tengani, the people of Doyang faced another grave problem which was the constant border dispute with the neighbouring Nagaland. As said by many inhabitants of Doyang, the border problem with Nagaland also became a reason for the state of Assam to carry the evictions in Doyang. Thus, evictions of their dwellings were regularly carried out after every assembly elections whether it was by the Congress government or the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government.

Hemandra Baruah, 73 years, was the pioneer of the movement against forcible eviction in 2002 and the president of the Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti (BTUSS). It was in 1968 that Hemandra Baruah came from Selenghaat, Jorhat and settled in Tengani in Dighali Maaj *Gaon*. Baruah says that the evictions were similar with the Bihu festival which comes at every season and were *maratmak* (deadly) and *danavia* (demonic). He tells, “They

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<sup>4</sup> The data was provided to me by Bimala Gogoi, a resident of Doyang where at the time of the massive movement in 2002 the number was 1,80,000.

<sup>5</sup> See Gohain, H. (2019). *Struggling in a Time Warp*. Guwahati: Bhabani Books, pp. 341-345.

<sup>6</sup> Dharmeswar Saikia, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

used JCBs and elephants to demolish *pucca* houses and burned and crushed the rest”.<sup>7</sup> Dharmeswar Saikia, 66 years, who was the founding secretary of the Doyang Mukti Sangram Samiti (DMSS) narrates his personal plight which made him seek refuge in the reserved forests of Doyang. Saikia’s father owned only 10 bighas of ancestral land which was inadequate to suffice his five sons with only 2 bighas of land each. They didn’t have any government job and had to depend on agriculture to feed their families and had to live in extreme poverty. Saikia says that once he got married he came out of his ancestral place in Jorhat and sought refuge in Doyang and started cultivation.<sup>8</sup> Bimala Gogoi, originally hailing from Komargaon village of Numaligarh, a small town located in the upper Assam district of Golaghat, now is a resident of Doyang. Gogoi narrates, “In 1965, my brother-in-law used to cut woods in the forests of Doyang. Soon, he cleared some of the forests and his family along with my sister permanently began staying there. Later in 1974, my brother also took some land here in Doyang. I too found a job as a non-permanent teacher in a primary school at Doyang. So I started living there. Later when the principal expired, I got a call to head the school, but I was so into the movement and struggle that I chose it as my path and never went to teach again”.<sup>9</sup>

Nipen Das who was 16 years old in 2002, when the eviction was carried out in Tengani participated wholeheartedly in the movement. Belonging to the Kaibarta community, a scheduled caste group mostly inhabiting in upper part of Assam of Brahmaputra valley, Das ancestors too faced the similar economic conditions that forced them migrate to Tengani.<sup>10</sup> Doyang and Tengani thus, became a settlement of people from different communities and tribes. “The government never addressed the needs of the flood affected people, nor did they do anything to rehabilitate the same and so the people came and settled themselves in Doyang and Tengani”, Hemendra Baruah told me.<sup>11</sup>

Since India’s independence in 1947, eviction drives of homes and settlements in Doyang and Tengani became a regular affair after every election but the largest eviction

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<sup>7</sup> Hemendra Baruah, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Dharmeswar Saikia, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Bimala Gogoi, personal communication, January 5, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Nipen Das, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Hemendra Baruah, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

drive was being carried out in 2002 by the Tarun Gogoi led Congress government. Khagen Das, a resident of Dighali Maaj gaon of Tengani composed poems and songs during eviction to depict the nature of brutality and their struggle. Das has penned a poem “The Storm of Eviction” (Translated by self from Assamese ‘Ussedor Dhumuha’) portraying the nature of brutality and the plight of the people of Tengani which is presented below-

*The storm of eviction has just come  
The larger Tengani has been demolished  
The surroundings have turned into chaos.  
The army of the government said-  
In Assamese and Hindi  
Move away, move away otherwise  
We will shoot you  
The army with them  
Have crushed and destroyed  
The beetle-nuts and coconut trees  
They used elephants to break our houses  
And not satisfied with that  
Have burned down our houses  
The fire rose  
With the sound of our burning houses  
The sound was frightening, ghostly in our ears  
The babies are startled  
The sound of the heartfelt cries  
They burned the houses one by one  
And the sky was black with the rising fumes.<sup>12</sup>*

Another one of such poems “The Heart Burns” (Translated by self ‘Ontoror Jui’ from Assamese) is illustrated below-

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<sup>12</sup> I met Khagen Das in Tengani on January 2, 2021 and have come to access the collection of poems and songs which he got published in the form of a book. Das, K. (2020). *Hojaag*. Jorhat: Digidarshan Prakashan, p. 48.

*Inside burns a grave pyre  
Who will put that out  
The burning pyre  
It is the grief that looms.  
Fallen under the trap of eviction  
Today Tengani  
Has converted to mortuary  
How inhumane is the Assam's government  
How merciless man has become  
It is the man who is the most intelligent of all today  
But it is the man who oppresses his fellow man  
Who in the world does this?  
But what to do where to go  
We have become helpless  
We made the government through our votes  
It is hard to believe  
They exercise power on the innocent people  
And oppresses and tortures  
Shame Shame.<sup>13</sup>*

The people of Doyang and Tengani claimed that they have been residing in those reserved forests since the last 60-70 years, and hence they are not obliged to obey the command of the state and started a massive movement for their rights. The people of Tengani were rendered homeless and were on the streets. The people decided to come under the banner of an organisation where they can jointly fight and secure their rights to livelihood. Amidst continued eviction drives, on 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2002 the people of Tengani formed an organisation named '*Brihottar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti*' (Greater Tengani Revolutionary Organisation for Development). As mentioned in the constitution of KMSS,

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<sup>13</sup> Das, K. (2020). *Hojaag*. Jorhat: Digdarshan Prakashan, p. 35.

the BTUSS slowly established itself as a revolutionary organisation who were fighting for their land rights.<sup>14</sup> The eviction drive notices was soon sent to the people of Doyang as well. The core members of the BTUSS went to Doyang and after discussions with the people of Doyang formed the ‘*Doyang Mukti Sangram Samiti*’ (Independent Revolutionary Organisation of Doyang) on 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2004. Bimala Gogoi of Doyang, says that the coming together of the two organisations was important for greater the number of people, the stronger will be the movement.<sup>15</sup> Under this organisation’s banner the people started a movement against the state’s massive eviction drives of people. To strengthen the movement, the members of both the organisations came together and carried out the movement in a strong manner.<sup>16</sup> During the eviction drives, Tulapoti Morang, a woman from Tengani, was evicted from the land they used to dwell for which they were rendered homeless. For many days, Tulapoti Morang and her two children lived under the open sky. Heavy rains at that time took the lives of Tulapoti Morang along with her two children. Lulu Gogoi of Doyang who was in the seventh month of her pregnancy lost her child in the midst of lathicharge by the police and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). Bimala Gogoi of Doyang says the brutal killing of the child was when the entire movement went a step forward. On 9<sup>th</sup> June of 2004, the people of Doyang and Tengani went to the District Commissioner’s office of Golaghat demanding for land rights, border issue, eviction and proper irrigation. Janmoni Saikia, a resident of Suratoni Gaon of Tengani now married to DighaliMaaj Gaon of Tengani too narrated her own version of the days of struggle.

*We used to hide in the tea gardens for nights. But at that time I was not concerned of my identity as a woman, never were we afraid of any boy of any sexual advances. We together with 400-500 people used to attend meetings, sing songs and our main concern was to make people aware and bring together on a common platform. Our houses were being burnt down and we needed to build a strong movement.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Bimala Gogoi, personal communication, January 5, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 1-4.

<sup>17</sup> Janmoni Saikia, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

Bimala Gogoi describes her struggle for land rights as *dharabahik* (continuous/unending). The movement led by the people of Doyang and Tengani thus gained momentum across age, gender and castes and soon the people were unitedly resisting the act of the government. Under the banner of BTUSS and DMSS, a team of 5 youths- Akhil Gogoi, Bhaben Handique, Soneswar Narah, Bhasco De Saikia and Manoj Tamuly<sup>18</sup> started a peaceful walk on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2005 from Guwahati to Doyang-Tengani which ended on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2005 to resist against the eviction drives carried out on the indigenous peasants in Doyang and Tengani, and also to fight for the land rights of peasants in the Assam-Nagaland border. As gathered from their accounts,<sup>19</sup> in the course of that journey they came to terms with the local population of Jagiroad and Jorhat and came to know that the people do not possess land rights. Similar situations were prevalent in nearby Kaziranga. From this rally, it came to their knowledge that the land problem was a grave issue in Assam and that the real peasant problems in Assam actually are land issues related to land rights, erosion of land by floods, regular evictions and all. It was at this point that Akhil Gogoi decided that in order to know the problem of land issues in Assam it was necessary for him to visit all the places of Assam. With this objective, the team of youths alongwith BTUSS and DMSS started a cycle rally on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2005 from Sadiya<sup>20</sup> to Dhuburi.<sup>21</sup> Where Sadiya is located in the upper part of Assam, Dhuburi is located on the lower most part of the region of the Brahmaputra valley. Throughout Assam, it came to their knowledge that the problems faced by the peasants are the same irrespective of caste and religion. The cycle rally ended on 20<sup>th</sup> July in Tezpur. Around 5000 people gathered that day on Tezpur and Akhil Gogoi along with the leaders of the rally formed the KMSS with an objective to start “new peasant movement” in Assam.<sup>22</sup> There were around 30 different organisations present on the day of 20<sup>th</sup> July which assented

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<sup>18</sup> Talukdar, J. (2020, March 20). *The Travails and Scuffles that marked Akhil Gogoi's rise in Politics*. The Wire. Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/rights/akhil-gogoi-assam-nia-bail-on-23.03.2020>.

<sup>19</sup> The role of KMSS in the Doyang and Tengani movement are given in detail in the constitution of KMSS as well as the various interviews of the leaders in leading Assamese daily newspapers. This was also personally communicated to me by Bhasco De Saikia on 02.09.2020 and Manash Konwar on 03.08.2020. Also see, Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Sadiya is located in the Tinsukia district of Assam. The distance from Guwahati to Sadiya is around 550 kilometers. Geographically, it is on the upper part of Assam.

<sup>21</sup> Dhuburi is a district situated on Southern bank of the river Brahmaputra. The distance from Guwahati to Dhuburi is around 290 kilometers. The place is an important commercial centre and is surrounded by rivers on three sides.

<sup>22</sup> The history of formation of KMSS was told by Akhil Gogoi in an interview with Amar Asom, a leading daily Assamese newspaper in Assam. See Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 5

to the formation of KMSS. They are Kendriya Krishak Jagaran Sabha(Nagaon); Janasetona Samiti Assam, Kampur; Dimoru Pothar Unnayan Samiti; Kakee Toralongsu Tongiya Unnayan Samiti, Kakee (Nagaon); Duhejar Bigha Unnayan Samiti, Kakee (Nagaon); Laalmati Unnayan Samiti, Kakee (Nagaon); Purrona Kakee Dimoru Krishak Unnayan Samiti (Nagaon); Rahmaria Gorakhohoniya Pratirudh Sangram Mancha, Dibrugarh; Dipila Unnayan Khondo Dabi Samiti, Patharughat, Mangoldoi, Darrang; Moina Bikakh Parishad, Baneikushi, Darrang; 2 No People Pukhuri Krishak Adhikar Samiti, Lanka; Brihottor Dimriya Bhumi Hastantor Dabi Samiti, Uttar Silpathar Unnayan Ganamancha; Namani Axom Songrami Mancha; Axom Krishak Parishad; Tezpur Zilla Samiti; Pragotikhil Nari Mancha, Tezpur; Progotokhil Mahila Mancha, Santipur, Damdama; Damdama Pressclub; Nalbari Zilla Haraniya Kachari Satro Hangtha; Axom Jatiyatabad Yuva Chatra Parishad; Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti; Axom Rajyik Krishak Parishad; Sadou Axom Pothar Parishalona Samiti; R.V.C, Okajaan; Purvanchalia Luka Parishad; Sadou Tiwa Satro Sangstha; Karbi Students Union; Sadou Mising Satro Sangstha; Sadou Axom Motok Yuva Satro Sanmilan; Sadou Moran Satro Sangstha; Dimasa Satro Sangstha; Nalbari Zilla Bodo Satro Sangstha, Damdama Anchalik Bodo Satro Sangstha etc.

These organisations which assented to the formation of KMSS were diverse small socio-economic organisations working on developmental works on varied issues. The organisations, mostly pertaining to grassroot and small areas have emerged out of socio-economic concerns of the diverse ethnic, women, youth, student, human rights and peasant groups. Of these, the Axom Jatiyotabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) (The Nationslist Youth and Student Organisation of Assam) is a bigger and influential youth and student organisation of Assam who also assented to the formation of KMSS as a peasant organisation of larger Assam. AJYCP has played an active part on the nationalist issues of Assam ranging from cross-border migration to adequate jobs for the people of Assam. The distinct regional and sub-regional organisations are village, anchalik and district level organisations of Assam which attends to specific issues ranging to developmental organisations of diverse issues to ethnic bodies, youth organisations, women organisations and human rights organisations.

The common participation of a wide range of organisations from all spectrum of the diverse population is very distinctive. It represents not only the voice of the masses but a



united whole, coming together for a common purpose cutting across age, identity, class, ethnicity, community etc. Apart from peasant organisations; there were student organisations, youth organisations, ethnic tribal organisations, literary organisations, human rights organisations who witnessed and supported the cause of KMSS and the larger problem of the peasantry. The history of the formation of KMSS was a long void of an absence of a popular organisation in the peasant community of Assam. And the representative character of diverse socio-economic, cultural and political organisation gave the impetus as a potent mass organisation of Assam.

Tengani and Doyang are thus, often referred to as the parents of KMSS, for it is because of the massive land rights movements that KMSS was born, Tengani its father and Doyang its mother. The emergence of a peasant organisation- KMSS was depictive of six things-

1. There lacked an organised forum for peasants to raise its issues and demands. At the time when massive evictions were carried out in Assam, the people though protested through various mediums (like different organisations, Human rights group, media) lacked a unified and cohesive platform which could act as a common channel for the people to voice their dissent.
2. The forest dwellers were agitating against the forest department of the state, which forcibly carried out the eviction drives. The peasants/forests dwellers came in direct confrontation with the policies and decisions of the state.
3. The rights of the peasant's were intimately related to adequate share of the natural resources, which includes basic rights such as the right to dwell. The leaders, when travelled from the length and breadth of the region were well acquainted with the plight of the peasants where problems of land rights were a major issue.
4. What led to the formation of KMSS was actually a mass appeal of the grievances of the people. The presence of many different organisations on the day of formation of KMSS depicts the common sentiment and concern of the people from various spectrums over peasant grievances. The organisations were largely student organisations, women organisations, ethnic organisations, youth organisations among other small peasant organisations. The sudden eviction of the dwellers from forest land evoked serious thoughts. It led to these organisations from many different places

come together and voice their concern. KMSS emerged naturally from the struggle of land rights.

5. KMSS was formed as a result of evictions by the forest department but its development cannot be solely related to that cause. While travelling from the nook and corner of the region, the members came to understand the plight of the peasant in Assam where land rights were a grave issue. The distress and plight of the common people over land issues and other day-to-day problems brought the organisation to the forefront.<sup>23</sup>
6. KMSS has brought the people at the margins and successfully led grassroots mobilisation in Assam. It has brought the poor, vulnerable, landless and the forest dwellers into Assam's mainstream politics and has initiated the left politics in Assam.

## **2.2 The Peasant agenda of KMSS**

While the history of the formation of KMSS is crucial to understanding the birth of the organisation, the organisation have worked towards achieving certain laid out objectives and agendas that it has vowed to achieve from time to time. In its constitution, KMSS has enlisted the following as its main objectives-

- 1) Land Reforms
- 2) Land rights to the indigenous people of Assam
- 3) 100% irrigation at fields
- 4) Rights of the local people over the natural resources in Assam
- 5) To build up a sound and strong peasant-centered economic model
- 6) To strengthen the anti-corruption movement
- 7) To build up a movement against environmental pollution and degradation
- 8) To oppose and resist liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Akhil Gogoi, personal communication, January 17, 2019 and Kamal Kumar Medhi, personal communication, March 28, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 56. Also the Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 7-13.

The aims and objectives as mentioned in the constitution of KMSS are largely economic in nature. Though the nature of the objectives appears more or less to be economic, the organisation aims to cater to social and political commitments in the future.<sup>25</sup> A.N Seth has discussed that peasant organisations have three larger goals- the social, economic and the political taking into account the peasant organisations affiliated to parliamentary political parties.<sup>26</sup> T. K. Oommen argues that all movements are anchored on broad issues of identity, equity and security.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the issues, concerns and objectives of the organisation are crucial in understanding the base of its struggle. Over the years, since its formation KMSS has been working in areas which it believes are intimately related to a peasant's life. Infact these are the very socio-economic conditions which gave impetus to KMSS as a mass organisation. Among the objectives, KMSS over the years has engaged on some of major issues that have driven the peasant politics and scenario of Assam. Some of these are its fight for land rights, land reforms, corruption, price rise, anti-dam movement and most significantly its struggle against the repercussions of globalisation accompanied by migration. Since the peasant issues were centered on most of the burning issues of Assam, understanding peasant struggle requires and demands contextualizing the contemporary peasant issues in terms of its socio-economic, cultural, geographical and political background. The peasant issues were region specific demarcated to the territorial boundaries of the state borne out of increasing alienation of the people from the state's programmes and policies.

When starting the journey with land rights for the people of Doyang and Tengani, KMSS has centered land rights as its primary agenda of its peasant's struggle. Its agenda for land reforms includes many different issues at hand like to completely change the existing land relations; land rights to the indigenous and native farmers; protection of peasant's land from corporate companies; fight for a law where people from outside the region of Assam cannot buy the indigenous people's land; complete survey of land in the region; to abolish the colonial laws on land, namely the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1886 and

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<sup>25</sup> This will be discussed in the upcoming chapters.

<sup>26</sup> Seth, A. N. (1984). *Peasant Organisations in India*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation.

<sup>27</sup> T. K. Oommen's two edited volumes on social movements broadly address the issues of identity, equity and security. For instance, Oommen, T. K. (2010). *Social Movements I: Issues of Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Oommen, T. K. (2010). *Social Movements II: Concerns of Equity and Security*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

introduce a new progressive law which is in consistent with the regional sentiment of the people; to provide for minimum 12 *bighas* of land to each peasant; fight for permanent solution to flood erosion, proper irrigation at all fields; operation to recover spoiled and barren land and char areas; to fight for illegal capture of peasant's land and to adequately distribute excessive lands of *Sattras* and other religious institutions among the pupils of the institutions.<sup>28</sup> The last agenda of KMSS was mentioned in an article by Akhil Gogoi though not mentioned in its constitution, which is more in the form of an idea expressed. In addition to the above agendas on land reform, the constitution of KMSS also roots for bringing about a permanent solution to international border issue which have been a grave concern and problem for the people of Assam.<sup>29</sup> The constitution of KMSS says, "Assam's crisis means peasant's crisis. The crisis of a peasant in Assam is the right to its land and resources. So, a peasant movement means to fight for land rights. To struggle for land rights for the native and indigenous peasants of Assam is the core motive of KMSS."<sup>30</sup> Most notably KMSS has aimed to abolish the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886; a colonial legacy which still continues to exist as a land law in Assam and urges for a progressive land law in consistent with the sentiments of the local people. Besides the struggle for land rights for the peasantry and the indigenous, KMSS organised its efforts in major thrust areas viz. the struggle against capitalism, environment struggle, and the struggle against migration and citizenship which are discussed below-

**The anti-Capitalist struggle-** Apart from its struggle for land rights and land reforms for the peasants of Assam, KMSS has been an ardent criticizer of the forces of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. For KMSS, the fight against globalisation which is one factor which has adversely affected the lives of common people and peasants is the "second phase of independent struggle".<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that the struggle of KMSS in the 21<sup>st</sup> century marks a completely different era of movement and struggle in globalizing India.<sup>32</sup> In

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<sup>28</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, pp. 224-225.

<sup>29</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> Oommen suggests three distinct phases of the nature and type of social movements in India. The first period, 1900-1947 was in the colonial period, the principle enemy was the British colonizer, drawn particularly to transform colonial subjecthood to citizenship in an independent India. The Second phase, 1947-1989 was

*Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*, Akhil Gogoi has gone at length discussing the repercussion of globalisation on the society in general and the peasant-workers in particular. Admitting that globalisation has its own merits, the consequences of it are heavy which adversely affects the general welfare of the public. Gogoi, in his *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi* says that globalisation largely has three major benefits. Firstly, globalisation enhances the profits of the customer because people are able to avail things at a cheaper price in a competitive market. Secondly it encourages merit and talent and hence leads to better production and lastly, since globalisation advocates the minimal role of the state, the role of the state in corruption also gets reduced.<sup>33</sup> Admitting that globalisation creates a new market, new principles and policies, it also leads to many kinds of insecurities in the society. Some of them according to Gogoi are economic insecurities, job insecurity, health insecurity, cultural insecurity, personal insecurities, environmental insecurities and political insecurities. Globalisation benefits only the rich countries and multinational companies while it is detrimental to the third-world developing nations like India. KMSS in its constitution has enlisted three aims in its struggle against privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation which are 1) attempt at working towards creating a public opinion on matters of borrowing capital from the World Bank and other foreign capital. Public hearing must be secured before giving lands to the big companies; 2) to oppose the desire of foreign companies to obtain the patents of resources of native/indigenous communities of Assam. More importantly, to secure the rights of the people of Assam over herbal medicine; and 3) to revoke/repeal all the memorandum of understanding (MOU) undertaken between the international financial institutions, the central government of India and the state government of Assam which was detrimental to the people of Assam.<sup>34</sup>

KMSS in its struggle repeatedly has brought to the forefront the repercussions of globalising and market world, where several new goods have made their way into the countryside, has replaced the local and native products, affecting the produce of the local artisans, weavers,

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marked with a focus on nation-building and modernization of India. The third phase which begins from the 1990s is the globalizing phase because of the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991. This phase marks the minimal role of the state, enlarged role of the civil society and the emergence of market in the economy. The third and the newest phase, according to Oommen has totally displaced the earlier two typologies of movement in India. See Oommen, T. K. (2010). *Social Movements I: issues of Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 34-38.

<sup>33</sup> See Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, pp. 9-10.

<sup>34</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 10.

peasants. In one of its press reports, KMSS said that *lakhs* of artisans being thrown out of their traditional occupation and peasants are being increasingly threatened by the decreasing prices of their products at the market.<sup>35</sup> Gogoi has depicted the insecurities that arises from liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation<sup>36</sup> and has taken a strong stand against all the consequences or developments of it. The decline of employment opportunities, stiff competition faced by the indigenous artisans, privatisation of education, increasing pollution are some issues, the organisation has taken up in its fight of the same. In a protest site against unabated price rise in 2011, Akhil Gogoi criticized the neoliberal economic policies of 1991 introduced by the then Finance Minister of India Manmohan Singh which is responsible for the price rise.<sup>37</sup> Citing an example on the same, Akhil Gogoi said, “the price of one litre of petrol on April 1, 1989 was rupees 8.50 whereas now it is 66.78 rupees while the price of diesel today stands at rupees 38.62 which was 3.54 rupees per litre in 1989.”<sup>38</sup> Its fight against the neo-liberal policies and the growing capitalist tendencies of the state has included the poor and the middle class also, who are also affected by it. The scope of its operation thus has enlarged to have included not only the peasantry but also the poor working class and the middle class as well.

On 6<sup>th</sup> August, 2018 the organisation staged a protest *dharna* against NEEPCO hydel power project which caused massive floods in Doyang region of Assam. It was the long agitation against the 2000 MW Subansiri hydro electric project in Arunachal Pradesh by KMSS<sup>39</sup> that has stalled the work on the Lower Subansiri project since December 16, 2011. On 10<sup>th</sup> of March in 2017, KMSS opposed the Assam Assembly’s move for resumption of

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<sup>35</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010-March 2013*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash.

<sup>36</sup> Gogoi has listed a wide number of insecurities like job insecurities, income insecurities, health insecurities, environment insecurities, cultural insecurities etc. See Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, pp. 15-16.

<sup>37</sup> Correspondent, (2011, May 17). Akhil Gogoi back on the streets- KMSS rally protests petrol price hike. The Telegraph. Accessed <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/north-east/akhil-back-on-the-streets-kmss-rally-protests-petrol-price-hike/cid/395749> on 05.06. 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Correspondent, (2011, May 17). Akhil Gogoi back on the streets- KMSS rally protests petrol price hike. The Telegraph. Accessed <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/north-east/akhil-back-on-the-streets-kmss-rally-protests-petrol-price-hike/cid/395749> on 05.06. 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Many organisations apart from Krishak Mukti Sangram Samit`i has opposed the Subansiri Hydel Power Project of which the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) has played a major role.

work on the project and demanded its withdrawal.<sup>40</sup> ‘*Marubhumi Aahe Lahe Lahe*’ (slowly it becomes the desert)<sup>41</sup> is a phrase the general secretary of the organisation, Akhil Gogoi uses to mean the effect of river dams in Assam. KMSS has vividly expressed that big river dams takes away the natural resources like land, river and sources of livelihood of village people; displaces poor peasants, peasant labourers and poor ethnic indigenous people. Gogoi has stated that as a result of big dams rivers will die; marine population will come to extinction and will flood the region as a result of mega dam projects.<sup>42</sup>

**Migration and Citizenship-** KMSS over the years has also been actively involved in the prolonged issue of migration which has been a key issue in the politics and society of Assam. The region of Assam has witnessed migration in large scale since colonial times. The first regulated migration was during the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Assam when tea was discovered in the region.<sup>43</sup> Sanjib Baruah argues that the instances of large scale migration started with colonial conquest of the region since 1826.<sup>44</sup> After independence, massive migration from Bangladesh has led to a demographic change of the region. Large and unprecedented scale of migration from Bangladesh has led to alienation of lands and insecurity among indigenous people who feared of becoming a minority in their own land. Such was the effect of migration that it resulted in six years of the unprecedented Assam Movement (1979-1985), a long mobilisation of the people of Assam which included all spectrums of people from the region. Elections to the state assembly were boycotted in 1979; law and order situation deteriorated, riots and communal tensions erupted and large number of people were massacred. The movement culminated in the ‘Assam Accord’ concluded between the leaders of the movement, the All Assam Students Union (AASU)<sup>45</sup> and the Government of India in August 1985. The Assam Accord holds 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971 as the cutoff date for the detection

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<sup>40</sup> The Telegraph, Saturday, March 11, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> This phrase is actually taken from the title of Akhil Gogoi’s work published in 2011. See Gogoi, A. (2012). *Marubhumi Aahe Lahe Lahe*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash.

<sup>42</sup> Gogoi, A. (2012). *Marubhumi Aahe Lahe Lahe*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash.

<sup>43</sup> Chandra, Mukherjee & Mukherjee. (2008). *India Since Independence*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.

<sup>44</sup> See Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>45</sup> The All Assam Students Union is a student’s organisation in Assam formed in 1967. It played a vital role in the Assam Movement and in fact regarded as the key player in the movement. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) the regional political party of Assam formed in 1985 is an offshoot of All Assam Students Union. See Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself: Assam and the politics of Nationality*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 121-124.

and deportation of foreigners. KMSS has been strongly acting on the long standing issue of immigration in Assam. Immigration from Bangladesh to Assam has always been a pivotal issue in Assam which has ignited heated debate on culture, identity and development. Where much of the discussion and debate on immigration has been on the grounds of identity of indigenous and ethnic groups of northeast India, KMSS attempts to focus it on the plight of peasants who are insecure and fear becoming alienated from their own lands. KMSS has since its formation opposed migration which adversely affects the lives of peasants, workers and the indigenous, native people of Assam. Time and again it has led out protests against the same. Alienation of tribal land has resulted in ethnic conflicts, riots, autonomous freedom movements and demands for separate homeland by indigenous groups. The effects of migration in Assam has been perceived from the 'identity' debate, since, as a region composed of different ethnic indigenous communities, identity has been central in defining their customs, traditions, culture. The state tried to address the issues of mass movements, violence and protests by making alternate arrangements in the constitution of the country and spaces in the decision making process. The problem of land alienation was never addressed instead alternate economic and political arrangements was made on behalf. Demanding appropriate protection of peasant land, KMSS has also taken an active role in demanding an updating of National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam. It has actively opposed the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 (CAB) and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA) throughout the region and even taken its protests to the parliament streets of New Delhi. At the same time, it has been persisting on the updating of National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, which it believes as an important and effective mechanism to detect and deport migrants from Assam.<sup>46</sup> The National Register of Citizens or the NRC is a register maintained by the Government of Assam containing names and other relevant information for the identification of Indian citizens in Assam, where Assam became the first state in India to have an official NRC. The NRC has been a long demand of the people of Assam because of the persistent threat posed by migration from the neighbouring Bangladesh (East Pakistan till 1971) since India's independence in 1947. Citizenship has been a contested issue in Assam's politics and Anupama Roy while exploring the ambivalence of citizenship in Assam states that the NRC in Assam 'marks continuity with a notion of citizenship that

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<sup>46</sup> This will be further elaborated in Chapter 4 of the thesis.



can be traced to the Assam Accord, the contestations around the amendment of the citizenship act in 1986, and subsequently the Supreme court judgement in the Sarbananda Sonowal case'.<sup>47</sup> The process of updating the NRC in Assam became a 'humongous bureaucratic exercise'<sup>48</sup> and a mammoth task in the identification of genuine citizens and detection of the foreigners. The process of updating the NRC in Assam started in 2015 and the final NRC was published on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2019.<sup>49</sup> However in the midst when the NRC was being carried out in Assam, the BJP led government at the centre tabled the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill in the Indian Parliament in July 2016 which seeks to amend the Citizenship Act of 1955 in an attempt to make migrants who are Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, eligible for citizenship. The Citizenship Act of 1955 provides that a person is application for Indian citizenship by naturalization provided that the person must have resided in India or served central government with a continuous period of 12 months. The act of 1955 also regulates that illegal migrants are prohibited from acquiring Indian citizenship.<sup>50</sup> The said and controversial CAB, which became an act in 2019 further proposes that the cut-off date for such migrants would be till the 31<sup>st</sup> December of 2014, which again goes against the Assam Accord of 1985 which sets 24<sup>th</sup> of March, 1971 as the cut-off date for expulsion of foreigners.<sup>51</sup> This additional change in the cut-off date by almost 44 years was again going against the said promise of the Assam Accord. The coming of the CAB at a time when NRC was carried out in Assam made the NRC look like a futile exercise to the people of Assam and was a direct blow to the sentiment of the Assamese people who have taken to the streets and fought for adequate provisions from time to time in the constitution of the country. The citizenship act has been amended many a times by the parliament keeping in view the long movement against foreigners in Assam and in a bid to protect the cultural identity in Assam. Akhil Gogoi clarifies its stand on its support of the NRC and its opposition to the CAA in Assam. Gogoi says, "The NRC is a long standing demand of the people of Assam and we

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<sup>47</sup> Roy, A. (2016). Ambivalence of Citizenship in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, LI (26 & 27), 45-51.

<sup>48</sup> Anupama Roy explores the bureaucratic exercise in the preparation of the draft NRC in her article. See Roy, A. (2016). Ambivalence of Citizenship in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, LI (26 & 27), 45-51.

<sup>49</sup> Visit <http://nrcassam.nic.in/> for more information.

<sup>50</sup> The Citizenship Act, 1955 (No. 57 of 1955), 30<sup>th</sup> December 1955.

<sup>51</sup> *The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019* (No 47 of 2019), India, dated 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2019.

reside in a democratic country. Free and fair NRC is a need of the hour to address the demands of the people of Assam. At the same time the BJP government by bringing the CAA has acted against the interests of the Assamese and has the indigenous people of the state”.<sup>52</sup> In 2018, Gogoi said, “The NRC is the most democratic way to solve the issue of migration democratically. But the BJP and the RSS are trying to dilute the National Register of Citizens by introducing the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill”.<sup>53</sup> KMSS has been actively campaigning against the said bill ever since it was introduced in the Indian parliament. This opposition to the CAB/CAA and welcoming of the NRC was in continuance with the wishes and demands of the people of Assam which it largely associates with.<sup>54</sup> KMSS’s stand on NRC and its opposition to the CAA was in consonant with the Assamese sentiment, where leading scholar of Assam, Hiren Gohain also commented that it is important to contextualize NRC, saying that the process of updating the NRC was rigorous and didn’t target any particular community.<sup>55</sup>

**Anti-corruption struggle-** The fight against corruption is one of the key agendas of KMSS. From time to time the organisation has not only led out massive protests on the same but also pointed out individual corruption cases in the public. It firmly believes that rampant corruption has impoverished the people of Assam. Most notably, KMSS has aimed to remove malpractices in the Public Distribution System (PDS), Panchayat and Rural Development, health and irrigation department of Assam.<sup>56</sup> It further aims to universalize the Public Distribution System (PDS), Antyodaya Anna Yojana<sup>57</sup> and BPL (Below Poverty Line) card<sup>58</sup> to the poor families. The peasant organisation has also enlisted appropriate wages for the peasant-workers, equal wages for men and women, proper treatment of pregnant women

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<sup>52</sup> These lines as said by Gogoi has been collected from various mediums like newspapers, news channels etc which is put together into a composite whole.

<sup>53</sup> CJP Team, (2018, September 6). *NRC is the way to solve the migration issue democratically: Akhil Gogoi*. Accessed <https://cjp.org.in/nrc-is-the-way-to-solve-the-migration-issue-democratically-akhil-gogoi/> on 21.10.2020.

<sup>54</sup> This will be further elaborated in Chapter 4.

<sup>55</sup> Gohain, H. (2019, September 5). *It is important to contextualize the NRC*. The Hindu. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/it-is-important-to-contextualise-the-nrc/article29334764.ece> on 14.12.2019.

<sup>56</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> Antyodaya Anna Yojana is a scheme of the NDA Government in 2005 which provides subsidized food to the poorest families of India. The Below Poverty Line families are generally provided with the scheme where are provided with ration cards to avail the food at subsidized prices.

<sup>58</sup> BPL card holders can avail Antyodaya Anna Yojana scheme and other such amenities provided by the Government of India.

workers as its main objectives. Besides these, it aims to remove malpractices in old age pension scheme (Vridhya pension), ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) scheme, *Anganwadi*<sup>59</sup> services etc. Under NREGA,<sup>60</sup> KMSS aims to give job card to every family, ensuring at least 100 days of work, to make the scheme corruption free and to completely uproot the contractors involved in NREGA. KMSS has taken out massive rallies and spoken out against cases of corruption by businessmen and politicians of the region. In 2011 it joined the India against Corruption (IAC) campaign along with Anna Hazare since it believes corruption affects the poor peasants the most. It has been fighting against the malpractices in Public Distribution System (PDS), cash-for-job scam in the Assam Public Service Commission,<sup>61</sup> corrupt practices in bureaucratic services and government departments and massive corporate scams of Assam. In all the corruption cases it has exposed so far, the peasant organisation takes the Right to Information Act (RTI) as a tool.

**The Environment Struggle-** In the neo-liberal era, KMSS has raised issues which are direct or indirect outcomes of globalisation in an agrarian and peasant society. Globalisation has had adverse repercussions on climate change and environment. Excessive industrialisation and its growth have resulted in climate change adversely affecting the crops of the peasants. KMSS aims to build a movement on environment conducive and favorable for a peasant society. Alongside, it aims to raise awareness on rising climate change and preserve the flora-fauna of the region as mentioned in its constitution. The environment movement of KMSS involves steps like adopting measures to avoid man-animal conflict, save the peasant's crops from elephants, monkeys and other animals, to have an ideal peasant garden as was

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<sup>59</sup> Anganwadi is a women and child care center in rural India which provides basic health services. It was started in India in 1975 as part of the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) under the Ministry of Women and Child Development. Anganwadi workers also provide effective methods of health education. See <https://wcd.nic.in/schemes/anganwadi-services-scheme>.

<sup>60</sup> The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 was enacted with the aim to enhance the livelihood security of the poor and adult members in the rural areas of India by providing a minimum of 100 days of guaranteed wage employment to every household. This act was to be implemented by the state governments in all the states as specified by the Central government. The NREGA was passed by the Indian parliament on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2005. As of now it stands as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act since 2009. For more information visit <https://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/home.aspx>. Also The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2002 (42 of 2005).

<sup>61</sup> The Assam Public Service Commission was infamous for alleged irregularities in recruitment of candidates in the Assam government services through the examination conducted by it in 2013.

envisioned by *Momai Tamuli Borborua*,<sup>62</sup> preserve the resources and living in tune with the natural surroundings. The constitution aims to bring a socialist productive system which keeps in harmony with the natural ecosystem which has been destroyed by the capitalist system.<sup>63</sup> The ‘environment movement’ of KMSS broadly deals with not only the challenges of environment and climate change in the era of globalisation, but understanding and acknowledging the nature and rich biodiversity and living in harmony with it. KMSS has stated that throughout history, peasants have lived in close proximity with the nature. The relationship of the peasant with the nature was religious and sacred. It was also because they claimed their forests as their own for it was their traditional source of livelihood.<sup>64</sup> The movement on environment by the organisation is a campaign towards fostering and developing natural resources and an awareness of the repercussions of climate change. KMSS has also pressurized the government to fully implement the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006, an act which fully recognizes the rights of the tribal and the forest dwelling communities to the land and other resources. This act “recognized and vested the forest rights and occupation in Forest land in forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who have been residing in such forests for generations but whose rights could not be recorded”.<sup>65</sup> KMSS since its beginning has been engaged with the rights of the forests dwellers and the right to the natural resources of the people. The environmentalism it has engaged in is borne both out of the desire to protect and preserve the animal species and natural habitats and also as an

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<sup>62</sup> Momai Tamuli Borborua was the first Borborua of the Ahom kingdom, a post created by Ahom monarch Pratap Singha. Momai Tamuli worked in the fields of his nephew. Pratap Singha once while passing by the road saw Momai Tamuli working in his fields and was impressed by the quality of his work in the fields. The king appointed him as the first Borborua of the Ahom kingdom, which had both executive and judicial powers. Borborua was one of the five *Patra Mantris* (councilors) of the Ahom kingdom along with *Buragohain*, *Borgohain*, *Borpatrogohain* and *Borphukan*. Momai Tamuli Borborua was instrumental in bringing the Paik system and reconstructing the village life and economy under the Ahom Kingdom. Momai Tamuli’s ideal village economy and efficiency in work is remembered fondly in the history of Assam. Momai here refers to one’s maternal uncle.

<sup>63</sup> The Constitution of KMSS, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> Saikia presents a contradiction of development planners, the conservatives and the smallholding peasants competing claims to the natural resources and the forests. Saikia, A. (2008). Forest land and Peasant Struggles in Assam, 2002-2007. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 35 (1), 39-59.

<sup>65</sup> The Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forests Rights) Act, 2006, No 2 of 27 of 29<sup>th</sup> December 2006. The act further defined terms such as the ‘community resource forest’, ‘critical wildlife habitat’, ‘forest dwelling scheduled tribes’, ‘forest land’, ‘forest rights’, ‘forest villages’ ‘habitat’ etc.

imperative of human survival.<sup>66</sup> The human survival seen here was its relentless campaign and struggles against the downstream impact of massive dams, deforestation, forest rights, artificial floods and other commercial exploitation of the poor peasants in the era of globalisation. In its fight against the construction of the 2000MW Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Project Akhil Gogoi said, “We made the entire environmental issue a political and national issue of Assam. River is of/for the people. But when one constructs dam, the river goes to the hands of the corporate and the capitalist”.<sup>67</sup> The capitalist appropriation of the natural resources was resisted by KMSS. The environmentalism thus has been for the survival of the poor as well as preservation of the rich biodiversity of Assam. The development agenda of the state has not only impoverished the poor but has also added to the environmental crisis. Colonization, rapid industrialization, commercialization have been a serious threat in degrading the environment and the poor have been the worst sufferers. The fight for a peasant friendly environment in a capitalist state has been one of the primary agendas of KMSS over the years.

KMSS has worked and raised issues affecting the lives of the peasants in Assam in many different ways. Apart from its core agendas, the organisation from time to time protested and expressed dissatisfaction over corruption cases of big industrialists and state departments in Assam, demanding CBI enquiry at the same; attempting at preserving the lost culture of bell metal industry; the lack of primary school teachers in rural areas; rights of tea garden workers; reservation for peasants at public trains; upgradation of NRC in Assam; organizing markets for the peasants, pressuring the government on taking strict steps on rhino poaching at Kaziranga National Park or protesting against the rising food and fuel prices or bus fare hike. The organisation has focused on issues which has posed threats to the life and culture of the peasants in general and Assam in particular in the globalizing era.

In one of its memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam on 17<sup>th</sup> May of 2010, KMSS brought to light on the general problems faced by the peasants of Charaideu Mahkuma which

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<sup>66</sup> Ramachandra Guha has argued that in the West the environment movement was actually a strong desire to protect endangered animal species and natural habitats whereas in India it arose out of the imperative of human survival. This Guha terms it as the ‘environmentalism of the poor’ which seeks to promote social justice along with sustainability like the Chipko Movement. See Guha, R. (2014). *Environmentalism: A Global History*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd, pp, xi-xii.

<sup>67</sup> Akhil Gogoi said this while receiving the Bhagirath Prayas Samman Award. Accessed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iS7W9LLEpU&t=3s> on 14.02.2018.

depicts the range of issues KMSS has been working. The issues raised by KMSS in the memorandum are-

1. The people of the mahkuma do not own land pattas. We urge you to take immediate steps to grant land pattas to the people living in the border areas, forest areas and small tea growers.
2. Continuous erosion and flood have created a lot of problems to the people. Please take appropriate and urgent steps for the same.
3. The people of the border areas of Assam-Arunachal and Assam-Nagaland are facing a lot of problems. NSCN has been imposing taxes on the Assamese people, especially on the small and independent tea growers who are obliged to pay 500 rupees annually on per bigha of land to the NSCN. NSCN is forcefully creating terror on the poor Assamese people who are armed with guns and pistols.
4. There must be adequate steps for 100 percent irrigation in the fields.
5. Wild elephants and monkeys are creating nuisance and destroying the rich rice fields in the mahkuma. The forest department must take adequate steps.
6. Although there are five protected forests viz. Abhaypur, Dilli, Sapekhati, Diroi Rangoli and Sola in the mahkuma, there is large scale deforestation going on. This must be stopped and the people of the forests must be given their land rights according to the Forest Rights Act of 2006. These people must also be given the responsibility to preserve the forests.
7. Historic road Dhudor Ali and many others are in a dilapidated condition and requires immediate attention.
8. There must be a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for the small peasants who are involved in the cultivation of various agricultural and allied activities such as fisheries, tea, jute, bamboo, beetle nuts etc.
9. 90 percent people of the mahkuma do not have NREGA job cards. Those who have the cards, do not have guaranteed work. There are also those who are not getting paid even after working under the scheme. There is a lot a corruption in NREGA and there must be high level inquiry into the same.
10. We are tired of talking about the alleged malpractices and corruption in the PDS. Till today you have not done anything to bring transparency into the same.

11. There is no supply of pure drinking water in the region.

12. There must be adequate inquiry into the malpractices of Indira Awaas Yojana.<sup>68</sup>

The memorandum reflects the range of peasant issues that KMSS works for ranging from basic land rights to issues of corruption and malpractices in state departments. The agendas discussed so far are regarded as pivotal to a peasant's life for KMSS. Where peasant organisations in India have by and large been addressing to larger ideas of rural development; excessive privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation have led to a crisis in the peasant's life. The agendas of KMSS mainly respond to the poor section of the population. The many objectives which KMSS has centered its struggle have focused on the poor, like the anti dam movement was on the downstream and livelihood impacts of the agrarian and rural population which would have massive consequences. Similarly, the environment struggle was about the securing the nature and livelihood of the people, which essentializes the poor. The marginalisation and alienation of the poor from the environment, economy and local resources was raised by KMSS. This crisis is integral to a peasant's identity in terms of progress and development. The objectives of KMSS are economic, social, political and cultural in nature. The objectives broadly define

- 1) Its objectives as a peasant organisation are diverse which not only encompasses conventional peasant issues like land rights and land reforms but many other important issues of the globalizing era which directly or indirectly affect the lives of the peasants in different ways. The dynamicity of KMSS can be seen in its ability and capacity to identify and address issues by which peasants are affected and which are pertinent for the welfare of the peasants.
- 2) Peasant's larger narrative in the era of globalisation includes many issues ranging from corruption to building of dams to climate change. This new narrative of peasant's struggle deconstruct traditional peasant's struggle of land rights, bonded labour and forced exploitation. Peasant struggle under KMSS has gained a new legitimacy in terms of its agendas and area of operation.

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<sup>68</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 220-221.

Pranab Bardhan says, “Capitalism in both rich and poor countries has been afflicted by problems of rising inequality and environmental degradation. Globalisation has increased anxiety everywhere about job security. This underlines the value of social safety nets- and retraining facilities, portable health insurance and environmental safeguards- in coping with adjustments to market competition.”<sup>69</sup> The deconstruction of the traditional peasant’s struggle of land rights and land reforms brings into forefront the crisis of the peasant life in the globalizing era. Environment problems, rising prices, migration, corruption, alienation of indigenous land and culture and the distress of the rural are the crisis of globalisation that KMSS has centered its struggle. KMSS which mainly organises among rural peasants in the region, targets the capital forces or capitalism for the distress of the peasants. Rejecting the post-colonial notion that the path towards development can only be brought by capitalism, KMSS aims at building an egalitarian society where peasants do not become the marginalized, which have been the case in history. However, because of the advancing capitalist tendencies of state, the struggle of KMSS is not only delegated to the rural peasants and workers, but also it has come to the cities. The structures of inequality, uneven development and the displacement of people caused by this capital development is manifold which is massive and continuous. KMSS centers its aims, objectives, agendas and goals against the capitalist tendency of the state. The discussion, aftermath, will largely cater to these aims, objectives, agendas and goals and how resistance against these forces has contributed towards its growth in the region. KMSS has centered its struggle within these capitalist and expanding globalizing tendencies where peasant crisis lies, which are of a different nature and also the way these tendencies fit into the political scenario in Assam. The struggle of KMSS is depictive of these trends of capitalism under the larger umbrella of globalisation.

### **2.3. The operation of KMSS**

The constitution of KMSS which provides the basic outline of its broader aims and objectives is also instrumental in providing the ethics and the philosophy of the organisation. It lays down the rules and regulations; organisational structure; duties of the office bearers;

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<sup>69</sup> Bardhan, P. (2015). *Globalisation, Democracy and Corruption. An Indian Perspective*. Kolkata: Frontpage Publications, p 37.



principles and ethics of spending the organisation's capital and the oath of its members. KMSS having been firmly established itself as a peasant organisation, with its head office in Guwahati and district offices in all the 33 districts of Assam, has organised itself from the grassroot level. The organisational structure of KMSS is pyramidal, with Gaon Sabhas (village committees) as the primary units of formation which federate at the Anchalik, Mahkuma and Zilla Samities. These units send representatives which forms the organisation's committee members.<sup>70</sup> The membership of the organisation extends to people who abide by the principles and willing to work for the aims and objectives of the organisation. The oath of a member of KMSS says, "I will abide by KMSS's constitution, its aims and objectives and will protect the confidentiality of the organisation."<sup>71</sup> KMSS further elaborates on certain principles for its members-

- 1) The members are subordinate to the organisation. One cannot impose their personal opinion on the organisation;
- 2) The organisation banks on the decision of the majority and it must be followed by all; and
- 3) In terms of organisational function, the decision of the higher committees would prevail.<sup>72</sup>

The fund of KMSS as mentioned in its constitution comes from five main sources which are

- 1) agricultural and other farming output; which includes rice, mustard, black lentil, potato, tea, broom cultivation, rearing of silk, fishery etc;
- 2) Fee of a new member of the organisation. The mandatory fee for a new member of KMSS is five (5) rupees.
- 3) Donation remains an important source of capital of KMSS. However it refrains from large donations from people, institution or company; people associated with Public Distribution System like cooperative shopkeepers, president; members of the Parliament and legislative assemblies.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 14-15.

<sup>71</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 16.

<sup>72</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 16.

<sup>73</sup> There are other rules of the organisation regarding the kind of donations they can accept. See the Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 20-21.

4) Annual fee collection and special fee collection ranging from trade unions and the public which may be voluntary.<sup>74</sup>

KMSS carried out a massive fundraising campaign in situations of crisis like fighting the legal battle of Akhil Gogoi in August-September 2020, who was incarcerated under the UAPA. The organisation collected a massive collection of 23 lakhs by the end of August, with some personalities individually donating to the cause.<sup>75</sup> The members of KMSS have placed donation boxes in busy areas of market places, asking for donations from the commuters of the city buses of Guwahati and shop to shop campaigning in the city which was carried out in public. In Tengani, the peasant organisation started a massive mustard cultivation in 150 bighas of land and generated revenue. It also engaged in cooperative fishery in about 170 bighas of land.<sup>76</sup>

## **2.4. The Development of KMSS**

**Figure 2.1: The growth of KMSS in terms of members since 2005<sup>77</sup>**

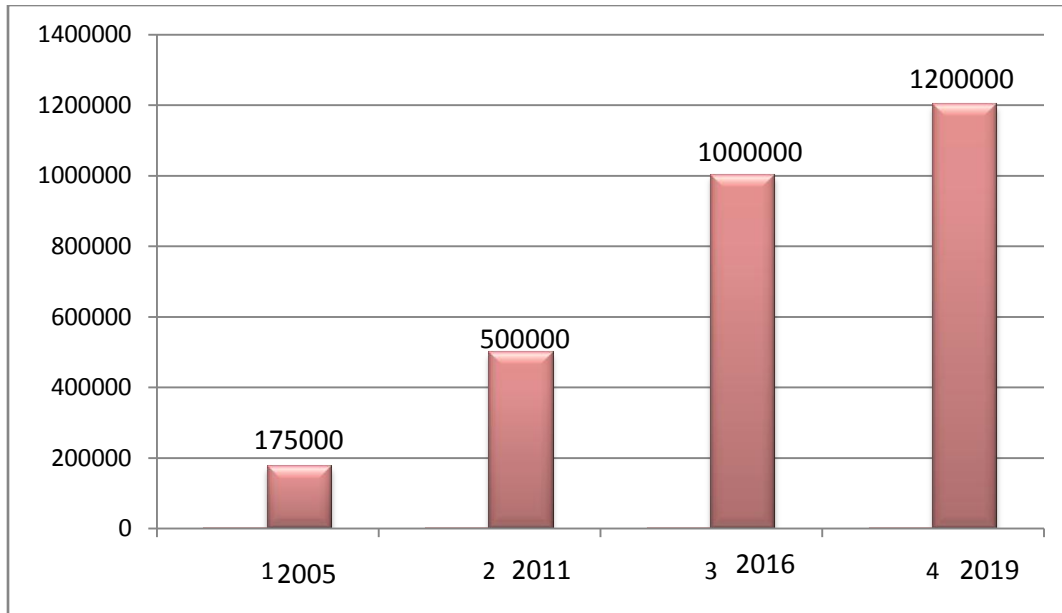
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<sup>74</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 19-22.

<sup>75</sup> Music composer of Assam, Manash Robin donated 2 lakhs rupees in the fundraising drive of KMSS.

<sup>76</sup> Das, D. (2010, April 18). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Assam: A brief note and an interview with Akhil Gogoi*. Sanhati. Accessed <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/> on 23.02.2018.

<sup>77</sup> The number of members of KMSS has been collected through personal communication with the members, leaders and office bearers of the organisation. The population of 5,00,000 population in 2011 was written by Akhil Gogoi in one of his book.



Source: Data collected by self

**Figure 2.2- The graph showing the ascending rate**

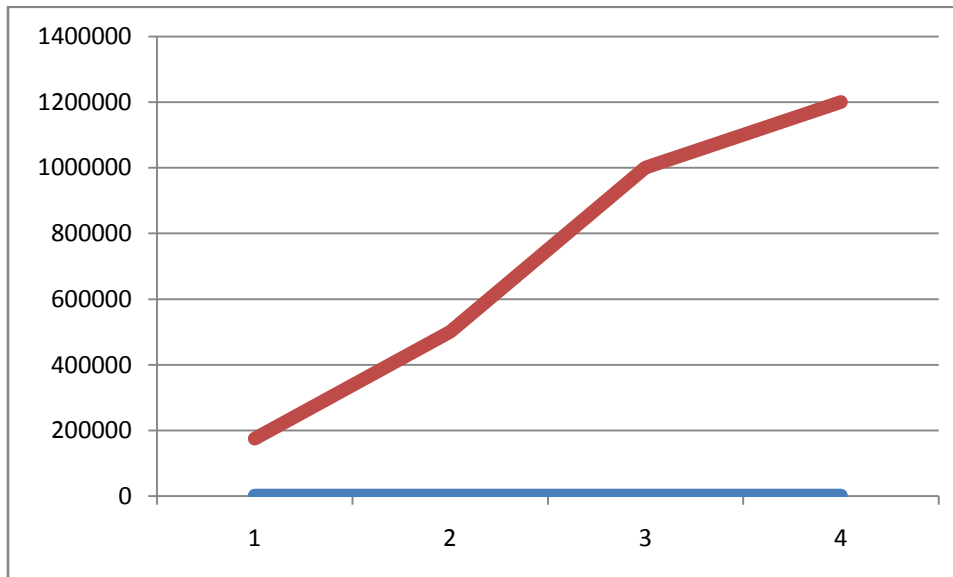


Figure 2.2- Ascending rate of members of KMSS over the years.

Figure 2.1 and 2.2 shows the growth of the members and the ascending rate of the members of KMSS over the years. There has been an eleven (11) fold increase of the members of KMSS in its 14 years of existence. During 2005, at the time of its formation the members of BTUSS and DMSS sympathized and jointly supported the formation of a peasant organisation which fights for land rights of the poor. The massive increase in its population indicates the mass appeal of the organisation which makes us imperative to understand its development over the years in terms of significant trends of politics it has faced.

The development of KMSS has been a gradual involvement with the local and prime issues of Assam over the years. This engagement of KMSS involves an understanding the manner it took its due course. Many a times, the issues shifted from peasant-centric to people-centric, the development can be seen in the discourse of building itself as a mass organisation in Assam. This has been largely contextual, arising sharply from the newly emerging needs and demands of the people. The gradual development of KMSS can be traced in the following significant phases

#### **Initial phase (2005-2011) *Rooting its base***

The initial phase is marked by the establishment of KMSS as a peasant-centric organisation in 2005, when there was a dire need of an organisation to fight for the rights of the peasantry on a region wide scale. The birth of the organisation was directly a result of the eviction drive carried by the state's forest department on the settlers of Doyang and Tengani region of Golaghat district of Assam. The forced displacement of peasants by the state led KMSS take the lead for the rights of the peasants in the due course. With its formation, KMSS immediately tried to address peasant issues of Assam, building its objectives and laying its road map for its functioning. The formative years of KMSS was laid in defining its basic struggle for the peasants like land rights for the indigenous people, land reforms, protests against price rise, corruption, displacement of peasants led by the developmental projects of the state. It staged a number of protests for land rights to the forests dwellers. The

movement for land rights gained strength throughout Assam and on July 10, 2008 the then Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi sat for a meeting with the organisation.<sup>78</sup>

In the meantime, in 2005 the construction of Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Power Project (LSHPP)<sup>79</sup> was started on the Subansiri river, which is on the border of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. In 2009, KMSS spearheaded a massive protest struggle against the Subansiri Dam Project, which had massive downstream consequences on the lives and livelihood of the peasantry of Assam. KMSS actively campaigned and mobilised mass support against the construction of the 168 mega dams by the state run National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC). Time and again it organised press meetings and publicly outcried the consequences on the peasantry and the common people caused by displacement of the mega dam project. On December 1, 2011 KMSS along with All Assam Students Union (AASU) blocked the passage of vehicles carrying goods for the construction of the dam in Lakhimpur town of Assam.<sup>80</sup> The General Secretary, Akhil Gogoi held multiple talks with the central and the state governments. Gogoi and KMSS focused not only on the downstream impact of the mega dam project but also one's right over the resources, primarily Assam's share on the total power production. The increasing environmental concern was also raised publicly by the organisation. The organisation teamed up with many other civil organisations of the state like Axom Jatiyotabadi Yuva Chatro Parishad, Tai Ahom Chatro Sangstha, Manob Adhikar Sangram Samiti, All Assam Minorities Students Union, Adibasi Chatro Sangstha, Ahom Sabha to name a few.<sup>81</sup> The organisation even took its movement against the mega dams, blaming the existing government and the state for its anti-people approach and asking the people to vote the ruling Congress government out of power in the state assembly elections of 2011. In many of its memorandums given to the state the environmental, social and economic impact of the dams has been mentioned at detail. On January 11, 2009, the organisation submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam demanding the

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<sup>78</sup>Das, D. (2010, April 18). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Assam: A brief note and an interview with Akhil Gogoi*. Sanhati. Accessed <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/> on 23.02.2018.

<sup>79</sup> The hydroproject lies partly in Arunachal Pradesh and partly in Assam. The dam is located in Dhemaji district of Assam. Accessed <https://www.power-technology.com/projects/lower-subansiri-hydroelectric-power-project/> on 05.02.2020.

<sup>80</sup> Sharma, T. (2012, March 9). *Fighting India's Mega Dams*. China Dialogue. Accessed <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/4799-Fighting-India-s-mega-dams> on 03.02.2020.

<sup>81</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010-March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 86.

closure of the ongoing dam construction on Lohit and Dibang river. On September 7, 2009, it submitted an illustrated memorandum to the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh who is also a Member of the Parliament from Assam on ignoring the downstream impact that large dams posed in the geologically and ecologically fragile region.<sup>82</sup> Again on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October in 2010 it wrote to the Prime Minister on the same subject of “seeking a moratorium on clearances for large dams in Northeast India, withdrawal of clearances granted to 2000 MW Lower Subansiri, 1750 MW Demwe Lower and 1500 MW Tipaimukh” further demanding that “future steps on hydropower projects and dams only after full, prior and informed consent of people in the region”.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, KMSS also involved in other important issues and written memorandums for adequate steps for the resettlement of displaced people caused by annual floods, compensation to people affected by storm, price rise, incessant cases of corruption in PDS and NREGA, increase of wages and the like.<sup>84</sup>

With its continuous struggle against the Subansiri project, the drive against corruption cases and scandals was campaigned actively by KMSS. In 2010, it publicly questioned the net property of a sitting Congress MLA Himanta Biswa Sharma in front of Cotton College, Guwahati.<sup>85</sup> Over the time, it had built such a strong campaign against corruption and malpractices in government and administrative services that in 2011 it joined the India Against Corruption Movement led by Anna Hazare in New Delhi. It supported Anna Hazare’s movement against corruption on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2011. On 16<sup>th</sup> December 2011, Akhil Gogoi joined Anna Hazare’s fast in New Delhi.<sup>86</sup> Corporate loot was publicly exposed through its regular press meets and in its memorandums. With the Right to Information (RTI), KMSS exposed the malpractices of Department of Agriculture in distributing seeds to the peasants. In November 2011 it started a mass movement for appropriate and suitable

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<sup>82</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010-March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 210-213.

<sup>83</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010-March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 223.

<sup>84</sup> Collected from memorandums in Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti.

<sup>85</sup> I remember this campaign of Akhil Gogoi when I was an undergraduate student of Cotton College in 2010. We assembled outside the college and listened to Gogoi.

<sup>86</sup> Mitra, N. (2011, August 16). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti general secretary Akhil Gogoi joined with Anna Hazare’s fast in New Delhi*. Times of India. Accessed <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Krishak-Mukti-Sangram-Samity-general-secretary-Akhil-Gogoi-joined-with-Anna-Hazares-fast-in-New-Delhi-/articleshow/9623353.cms> on 03.02.2020.

prices for rice, jute, tea leaves, mustard seeds and sugarcane at the market for the peasants of Assam. The protests against price rise was not only relegated to the rise of foodgrains, but also for subsidized electricity bill of households and staged a number of protests in front of *Bijulee Bhawan* of Guwahati in July 2011. Simultaneously it raised its concern over the price rise of diesel, cooking gas and kerosene at an increasing level.

This phase was characterized by events that grabbed major attention of the public and the media as a mass organisation. In 2008, Akhil Gogoi was awarded the Shanmugam Manjunath Integrity Award for his fight against corruption. The Public Cause Research Foundation awarded him the Right to Information (RTI) award in 2010.<sup>87</sup> In October 2010, Akhil Gogoi was awarded the Indian Youth Leaders by CNN-IBN.<sup>88</sup> Because of these developments, Gogoi's popularity as a mass leader of the peasants increased in the country. The growing developments of KMSS in 5-6 years as a popular organisation of the masses, which have mobilised the common people and led successive movements against the state led developments and corruption have rattled the state. On February 2011, the Tarun Gogoi led Congress government labeled KMSS as a Maoist organisation. This was perceived by critics and the civil society as the government being increasingly becoming insecure by the larger mass appeal and politics of KMSS.

Other than its activism, Akhil Gogoi, the prime face and general secretary of the organisation authored his two books *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi* and *Marubhumi Aahe Lahe Lahe*,<sup>89</sup> the first book on the politics of globalisation, corruption and the larger struggle associated with it and the later on the repercussions of the constructing dams in Assam on November 2011. The next month, the publishers reprinted a second edition of both the books. These books of Akhil Gogoi brought recognition to KMSS and brought to the public the broad agendas, its ideology and its stand on the various issues of Assam. A significant development of KMSS during this phase is that is established its women's wing namely-

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<sup>87</sup> India Today, (2012, July 7). *Who is Akhil Gogoi*. India Today. Accessed <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/rti-activist-akhil-gogoi-kmss-team-anna-menber-108328-2012-07-07> on 05.02.2020.

<sup>88</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 32. Watch the complete video on [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70PY9N\\_W8kE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70PY9N_W8kE)

<sup>89</sup> Akhil Gogoi's first book '*Uribo Pora Hole akou Jujiluheten*' was co-authored with Geetashree Tamuly in 2003 before he entered the active politics. The above mentioned books are Gogoi's second and third books respectively.

*Nari Mukti Sangram Samiti* (Independent Revolutionary Organisation of Women) [henceforth NMSS] on October 24, 2010. With the rising popular appeal of KMSS in Assam, the organisation also thought it imperative to raise the issues of women alongside the peasantry/workers with the objective of bringing equality and ending exploitation of women in different spheres of life.<sup>90</sup> The many objectives of NMSS as enlisted in its constitution are- 1) To build up a struggle against the exploitation of women, the patriarchal system of the society and the rigid rules of the society; 2) to fight against superstition, witch hunting, dowry, child marriage and such other harmful customs and traditions of the society by struggling for adequate laws; 3) to fight against the harmful elements of the society, inhumane customs, prostitution etc; 4) to build up a struggle against domestic violence by strengthening the panchayat and mahkuma laws, appointment of special protection officer, shelter homes etc; 5) equal property rights; 6) fight for 50 percent reservation for women in all fields; 7) to bring about awareness of women rights and laws among the people of Assam; 8) to fight for proper implementation of the various schemes of women and children; 9) To work for economic independence of women; 10) To fight for regularization of wages and against exploitation for the women workers in factories, tea gardens and other small, micro and large industries; 11) to work for women's participation in the larger fight against social evils and corruption.<sup>91</sup> KMSS aims to work closely with NMSS and established its first wing, thus marking a new development in its regular peasant politics.

All these events added to the increasing popularity of KMSS and its leader to a considerable extent. Within a span of six years it successfully managed to launch a peasant movement centered on land rights, land reforms, rights of the people over natural resources. It situated the peasant crisis as outcomes the global capitalist system where it openly contested the repercussions of mega dams on the livelihood of peasants. The first phase dwelt on major peasant issues of the region- land rights, security of the peasants, repercussion of mega dams on the peasant land, environmental security etc. Simultaneously corruption, price rise was identified by the organisation as major peasant problems.

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<sup>90</sup> Constitution, *Nari Mukti Sangram Samiti*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>91</sup> Constitution, *Nari Mukti Sangram Samiti*, pp. 11-14.



The initial years were largely peasant centric, the organisation trying to grapple with major issues of importance to the society and the peasants at large. An initial movement for the land rights of the people from forcible evictions by the state forest department, it gradually gained currency in terms of addressing pertinent peasant issues. The forcible evictions of the landless, built pressure on the unorganised masses on having a united platform for voicing their concerns. This phase was significant for the organisation to come up with certain objectives in building a strong movement. Its movement for land rights of the peasants, the Subansiri anti-dam movement and its relentless fight against corruption and price rise made KMSS a peasant organisation with a mass appeal and in 2011 it recorded a total of 5,00,000 membership. In a short span of time, it came to be known as a crusader of rights of the peasants and the poor which launched successive movements for the same.

### **Middle phase (2012-2015) *Extending/Expanding its base***

While KMSS continued its struggle against the Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Power Project, the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) stopped the construction of the mega dam project in December 2011.<sup>92</sup> In the beginning of 2012, KMSS demanded the complete stoppage of the construction by taking out cycle rallies alongside Subansiri river.<sup>93</sup> In this cycle rally, Akhil Gogoi organised meetings at the villages of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji<sup>94</sup> spreading awareness and appealed the people to organise themselves for a mass movement against the mega dam project in the future. With rising protests, a team of members of NHPC had talks with the organisation<sup>95</sup> on 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2012. Medha Patkar, the popular social activist joined the movement against mega dams on February 23 2012. Though the NHPC stalled the further construction of the mega dams, KMSS continued its campaign among the rural masses on the repercussions of the dams and its affect on livelihood.

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<sup>92</sup> It was reported that because of huge protests by anti-dam protestors who blocked roads and the river Brahmaputra preventing the shipment of machinery. See <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/india-news-subansiri-hydel-project-disaster-on-the-cards/302347>

<sup>93</sup> KMSS teamed up with Axom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad, Sadou Deuri Satro Hangstha, Sonowal Kachari Jatiya Parishad and Tai Ahom Chatro Hangstha. This cycle rally which started on 30<sup>th</sup> January ended on 9<sup>th</sup> February, 2012.

<sup>94</sup> Lakhimpur and Dhemaji are two districts located in Northern upper Assam, nearer to Arunachal Pradesh.

<sup>95</sup> It also included other organisations who took part in the Subansiri mega project.

KMSS, an already established, fully fledged peasant organisation by now continued with its fight for the peasants and working for the objectives laid down in its constitution. It continued its relentless struggle for land rights, against price rise, corruption and malpractices in different government departments. The struggle for land rights reached Guwahati when in 2012 the state government carried an eviction drive in the hill areas of the city. KMSS took out massive rallies demanding land pattas to the local people of Assam who have been residing in the city since decades. Towards the end of 2012 it established its central office at Guwahati.<sup>96</sup> KMSS extended more to the city, by finding adequate markets for the peasants; demanding adequate remedy of rising water crisis in the city, remedy for artificial floods in Guwahati etc.

This phase also marks another significant development of KMSS. On September 2011, under the aegis of KMSS, Bedabrat Gogoi won the post of General Secretary in the students union election of Cotton College State University defeating the AASU representative Bhaskar Chaliha by a narrow margin. This was the first win for KMSS and a breakthrough among the student community of Assam overpowering the AASU which dominated the student electoral politics in all the major educational institutions of Assam.<sup>97</sup> On August 22, 2012, KMSS launched its own student organisation, *Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti* (henceforth SMSS) in a convention organised at District Library of Guwahati. With an elaborate constitution, its student organisation aims at reforming the educational sector which according to KMSS is fast becoming alienated in the capitalist era. SMSS was established with the aim of staging a united students and youth movement against unemployment, price rise, corruption, mega-dam project, floods and other regional issues of Assam.<sup>98</sup> KMSS extended its support by including the students in its struggle by launching its own student faction. Other than the regular issues at hand, this student body of KMSS initiated agendas like permanent appointment of faculties across schools, colleges and universities of Assam; regular scholarships for students; public funding of education and against its privatisation;

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<sup>96</sup> The office of KMSS which is located at Gandhibasti area of Guwahati has been donated by Hemolata Deka, 86 years in memory of her husband Doikhyoprasad Deka. Doikhyoprasad Deka was the president of the Brihottor Guwahati Bhumihiin Nagarik Sangstha who died in 1982. Hemolata Deka donated the house along with the plot of land by seeing the relentless struggle of KMSS for the land rights of the landless.

<sup>97</sup> However it must be noted that the All Assam Students Union has a strong presence only in the Brahmaputra valley and not in the Barak valley of Assam.

<sup>98</sup> Constitution, Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti.

against fee hike; setting up of hostels and free and fair students union election in colleges and universities. In 2013, under the aegis of KMSS, SMSS again won the students union election with Joydeep Bora as its General Secretary at Cotton University. In 2015 SMSS won the post of General Secretary and Assistant General Secretary at Cotton University. The same year it won the post of President at Gauhati University students union elections which was the first entry of SMSS as a major student's organisation in Gauhati University. It was last in 2018 that the student organisation swept the Cotton University polls, Pranjal Kalita winning the post of General Secretary. This paved the way towards SMSS as an alternative to the other student organisations of Assam. Significantly this was also the first time in the history of student politics of Assam that a Marxist and a left leaning student organisation emerged as a powerful student organisation in Assam.

Significantly in a short while after extending its reach to the student community of Assam by establishing SMSS, KMSS also extended its reach to the tea garden labour community of Assam when it formed the *Sah Shromik Mukti Sangram Samiti* (Revolutionary Organisation for Tea-Garden Worker's Liberation) [henceforth SSMSS] on 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2013 in Bukahula playground of Titabor, Jorhat.<sup>99</sup> In the mean time, KMSS formed a nexus with SSMSS and formed the *Krishak-Shromik Mukti Sangram Samiti* (Peasant-Workers Independent Revolutionary Organisation). The main objectives of *Krishak Shramik Mukti Sangram Samiti* are 1) ensuring land pattas to the tea garden workers who have been residing in the areas for long; 2) to fix the minimum wage at 330 rupees per day and to fight for an annual increase in their wage; 3) To fight for the Sunday wages of the workers 4) to provide provident fund and pension to the workers within a month of their retirement from work; 5) To bear the entire medical costs of the family members of the workers by the tea garden companies; 6) to give land pattas to the previous workers; 7) to stop the practice of selling of land to the landlords by the garden workers; 8) to fight for the Schedule Tribe status for the tea garden workers.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> SSMSS was formed at Bishnuram Barua Hall, Jorhat, Assam. See Sharma, D. (2016). *Mahasangramar Duronto Sainikjon*. Guwahati: Kasturi Press, p. 59. Also Gogoi, A. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013 to March 2015*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 47.

<sup>100</sup> Sharma, D. (2016). *Mahasangramar Duronto Sainikjon*. Guwahati: Kasturi Press, p. 44.

By 2013, KMSS included mobilisation and political participation of women, workers, tea garden labourers and students as well. KMSS has extended its jurisdiction by forming separate organisation for the workers, women and the student youth in the region namely *Krishak Shramik Mukti Sangram Samiti*, NMSS and SMSS. In its constitution KMSS vows to work among the workers, women and students of the region and at the same time try to build a cultural force among them.<sup>101</sup>

On other front, Akhil Gogoi, who continued with the post of General Secretary of KMSS and one of the main leader of the organisation published his third book *Bideshi Homoishya aru Jatiyo Aandulonor Poth*, which touched on the persistent issue of migration in Assam on December 2012. The book's first edition was completely sold out in 4 days in the North-East Book Fair in 2012.<sup>102</sup> Gogoi's *Poribortonor Akhora* was published on December 2014. His relentless writings on issues which he and his organisation have been fighting, was another significant step in putting forward the main issues and carrying forward the struggle. KMSS also took the long unsettling issue of migration in Assam.

The era also marked the organisation's involvement in every important issue that grabbed headlines of the media houses and common people. It demanded strict punishment for the G.S road incident's perpetrators of 2012, when a girl was openly molested by a mob in the busy streets of Guwahati-Shillong road. In 2013 it condemned Rabha Hasong killing, when the police opened fire killing 12 people to control the raging people of Rabha Hasong Autonomous District Council who were opposing the holding of Panchayat elections ahead of the Autonomous Council polls. It also condemned the police firing at Baghmari of Sonitpur district, when the police opened fire to the people of char areas who were protesting over the blockage of a road by a PSU-Power Grid Corporation of India Limited.<sup>103</sup> KMSS also gave a press release to arrest the people involved in the 52 lakhs rupees corruption case of the construction of the traditional Aathkhelia Namghar in Golaghat on September 5, 2013. On 26<sup>th</sup> October 2013, KMSS as well as NMSS demanded death penalty within 3 months to

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<sup>101</sup> Constiution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> Accessed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fLxjhdCNE8> on 31.01.2018.

<sup>103</sup> Collected from Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti.

the alleged murder and rape of two women at Azara of Guwahti.<sup>104</sup> The organisation addressed diverse issue at hand which also concerned the common people and it came to be associated as not only a peasant and worker's organisation but a pan organisation of Assam.

In November 2015, KMSS established its *Kaziranga National Orchid and Biodiversity Park*, a cooperative society of the peasant organisation as an attempt at preserving the rich biodiversity and conserving the rich flora and fauna of Assam at Durgapur village of Golaghat district of Assam. The park consists of a Green House photo gallery, medicinal herbal plant garden, product outlet corner, fruit garden, flower garden, rock garden, rice museum, fish pond and a place for folk cultural practices<sup>105</sup> which are regularly performed for the tourists. Attempts have been made to promote traditional weaving where *Taator Haals* are placed where local people weave their own clothes. *Dheki*, a traditional rice pounding apparatus, which have lost its value and usage with the advent of modern machines is also kept at the park. The aim of the park is to enrich people about the heritage and cultures of the local people and at the same time a symbolic message to the repercussions of globalisation on the life and culture of the people of Assam. Akhil Gogoi, the leading initiative of the Kaziranga National Orchid Park, established in 2015, says the attempt to preserve the rich flora and fauna at the age of globalisation was necessary for the future generation of peasants in the region.<sup>106</sup> The park attempts to throw light on the alternate ways of peasant sustainability apart from traditional rice cultivation in Assam.

The middle phase thus witnessed the organisation's constant efforts in expanding its reach to the people, thereby, simultaneously asserting its roots in the society and culture of Assam. The establishment of SMSS and SSMSS under its wing expanded its jurisdiction to the students, youth and the workers. This made the peasant organisation establish its presence among many different sections of the society by addressing their issues. The peasant organisation worked for its sustainability, by constantly trying to address pertinent issues of Assam, and thus expanding its social and economic base of the region.

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<sup>104</sup> Collected from Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti.

<sup>105</sup> Accessed from <https://theshazworld.com/2016/03/23/kaziranga-national-orchid-park/> on 29-08-2018.

<sup>106</sup> Akhil Gogoi, personal communication, January 17, 2019.

By extending the scope of KMSS, the organisation has created multiple sites of power by including gender, youth and workers in its ambit. Pramod Parajuli accepts that in the new social movements, antagonisms are being expressed not only through class power but by the ‘multiple sites of power’ such as gender, ethnicity, caste and regional identity.<sup>107</sup> These multiple sites of power is a strategy of KMSS to counteract the capitalist state. From peasants being on the vanguard, the second phase depicts the scope of the struggle of KMSS including sections which are affected and threatened by the state led development.

KMSS established its roots firmly not only in forging a united peasant’s movement but also extending its area of operation and base. 2012 marks a new phase in the politics of KMSS with several new projects of reaching the people and extending its base to include different sections of the society.

### **Transitional phase (2016 onwards) *Affirming its roots***

The politics and operation of KMSS became unidirectional when the BJP led government at the centre introduced the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, in the Indian parliament in 2016. The bill, now an act introduced in the Lok Sabha on July 15, 2016, aimed to provide citizenship status to the migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain or Parsee communities who entered India on or before 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2014.<sup>108</sup> With the introduction of the bill, KMSS staged nation-wide protests against the repercussion of the proposed bill on the society, economy, culture, traditions, ethnicity, demography and polity of Assam, which goes against the provision and promise of the Assam Accord. Trying to assert not only the ill effects and communal nature of the bill, which does not include people from the Muslim community, the organisation also called on the partial nature of the BJP led government at the centre, where Assam as a region will be most adversely affected by the bill because of its strategic location<sup>109</sup> and the long driven

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<sup>107</sup> Parajuli also says that the focus of the new social movements is to transform the nature of politics rather than to capture state power through elections or violent revolutions. See Parajuli, P. (2013). Power and Knowledge in Development Discourse: New Social Movements and the State in India. In N. G. Jayal, *Democracy in India* (pp. 258-288). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>108</sup> See the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, No 47 of 2019. Dated 12<sup>th</sup> December 2019. This bill which became an act further states that the residence period of these migrants shall not be less than 5 years. It amends the Citizenship Act of 1955 which said the residence period of migrants shall not be ‘less than 11 years’.

<sup>109</sup> Assam shares its international boundary with Bangladesh, where migration from the country to Assam has been a pertinent problem dominating the entire scenario of Assam since independence.

identity crisis and violence caused by migration. This particular move by the BJP government at the centre opened up a series of revolts and movements across the state by KMSS and mobilised the masses on the same. It took up naked protests in front of the state secretariat, undertook indefinite hunger strike, distributed leaflets in the remote areas of Assam and even pledged to move to the Supreme Court if the bill is passed in the Indian parliament.<sup>110</sup> KMSS teamed up with many different regional organisations, civil society and academia staging protests in different ways. In 2017, the Wire Magazine printed an article on the year's '10 acts of defiance' which listed Akhil Gogoi's strong dissent and protests against the CAB at number 8.<sup>111</sup> On December 2018 KMSS led 70 other organisations of the region and staged a united protest against the bill. It took its struggle to the streets of the national capital in New Delhi at the Parliament premises. It regularly criticized both the central and the state governments for playing with the sentiments of the Assamese people where the biggest threat in the society has been the pertinent issue of migration. In one of the major protest rallies Akhil Gogoi was reported saying, "We cannot accept the anti-indigenous people CAB under any circumstances. This bill will bring as many as 1.9 crore Hindu Bangladeshis to Assam and will threaten the existence of Assamese language, besides taking up jobs rendering the local people unemployed."<sup>112</sup> The phase starting from 2016, the peasant organisation's main agenda was centered on the controversial citizenship bill which became a threat to the culture and identity of the Assamese people. Though KMSS earlier worked for many issues of the peasants and common people, this era was the biggest turn towards regional assertion where all its politics were directed towards saving Assamese culture and identity. The turn towards Assam's greater interests and its development became so significant that Akhil Gogoi penned an entire book on Assamese nationalism "*Axomiya Jatiyotabaad*" (Assamese Nationalism) in 2018.

This phase of KMSS became more radical and revolutionary in its resistance against CAB and almost all its attention was diverted towards the bill. Akhil Gogoi was arrested on 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2017 and was kept 105 days in prison when he was addressing the public

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<sup>110</sup> However with the arrest of its leaders following the anti-CAB agitations there hasn't been any move even after the bill was passed and became an act.

<sup>111</sup> The Wire Staff, (2018, January 1). *Ten Acts of Defiance in 2017*. The Wire. Accessed <https://thewire.in/politics/watch-ten-acts-defiance-2017> on 25.10.2019.

<sup>112</sup> Pratidin Bureau, (2019, December 5). *KMSS launches massive agitation against CAB*. Pratidin Time. Accessed <https://www.pratidintime.com/kmss-launches-massive-agitation-against-cab/> on 19.02.2020.

rally on the ill effects of CAB, at Moran.<sup>113</sup> This was the first time that Akhil Gogoi was detained under the National Security Act (NSA). In December 2019, when the CAB was passed in the Indian Parliament, some members of KMSS including Akhil Gogoi, were arrested under sedition who were protesting against the said bill as a preventive measure by the state.<sup>114</sup> After a long incarceration of more than 18 months, Akhil Gogoi was cleared of all the charges on July 1 of 2021. KMSS in this phase became more intensified and relentless in its fight against the CAB and CAA.

CAB was passed in the Indian parliament on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2019 and it became an act. Immediately after the bill was passed, there were large scale protests in Assam outcrying the move of the BJP led central government of playing with the national sentiments of the people of Assam. The move against CAB and CAA gave regional distinction to the organisation and it came close with many other regional organisations. On December 6, 2019 KMSS said, “it is time for all the organisations in Assam to unite and fight together against the bill. If AASU says it will unite, the KMSS is ready to make any sacrifice.”<sup>115</sup> KMSS, who swore of not taking the parliamentary route declared that it will contest the assembly elections of Assam in 2021.<sup>116</sup> The decision to enter into formal politics was discussed at the organisation’s executive committee meeting on December 28, 2017.<sup>117</sup>

Akhil Gogoi who was in prison, arrested for his involvement in anti-CAA protests in December 2019, requested all other regional forces of Assam to form a united regional force under one flag, one symbol and one agenda before the Assam state assembly elections of 2021. AASU came out with a statement saying the KMSS’s appeal was a kind of imposition

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<sup>113</sup> This will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.

<sup>114</sup> Discussed further in Chapter 3.

<sup>115</sup> Express News Service, (2019, December 6). *Protests continue in Assam ahead of tabling of Citizenship Bill in Parliament*. The Indian Express. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2019/dec/06/protests-continue-in-assam-ahead-of-the-tabling-of-citizenship-bill-in-parliament-2072086.html> on 19.02.2020.

<sup>116</sup> Akhil Gogoi in a press meet said that the campaigns for the upcoming elections will be started from March, 2019. However Gogoi said that the existing name of the already formed political party of KMSS- Gana Mukti Sangram Asom may be altered or may float a new one. Gogoi’s main motive was to provide an alternative political platform to the people of Assam to take on the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party minus the Congress. See Scroll Staff, (2018, January 15). *Akhil Gogoi says he will contest the next Assembly elections in Assam*. Scroll. Accessed <https://scroll.in/latest/865173/akhil-gogoi-says-he-will-contest-the-next-assembly-elections-in-assam> on 19.02.2019.

<sup>117</sup> Scroll Staff, (2018, January 15). *Akhil Gogoi says he will contest the next Assembly elections in Assam*. Scroll Accessed <https://scroll.in/latest/865173/akhil-gogoi-says-he-will-contest-the-next-assembly-elections-in-assam> on 19.02.2019.



to the regional organisations and went ahead to forming its own political party.<sup>118</sup> The KMSS gave a deadline to the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP), the political party of AASU, for the unification of the regional forces, which the later having declined, KMSS decided to launch its own party. On October 2, 2020, the 151<sup>st</sup> birth anniversary of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, KMSS announced their political party- Rajjor Dal (People's Party) with the support of 70 indigenous organisations of Assam including the popular *Bir Lachit Sena* (Lachit Army). With the presence of noted film personalities and academicians, the party vowed to work as a political alternative to the BJP-RSS and the Congress-AIUDF. This happened before the Assam state assembly elections were scheduled in 2021. Apart from working to roll back the controversial CAA, Rajjor Dal aims to- 1) work for a sovereign, socialist, secular democratic republic as declared in the preamble of the Indian constitution; 2) to work for larger decentralisation of powers and adequate exercise of the federal provisions of the constitution; 3) to oppose/fight forces who attempts to curtail or demean the constitution of India and its provisions and unitedly fight those forces in cooperation with other states; 4) to oppose centralisation, authoritarian and fascist nature of government; 5) to work for the greater good of the people of Assam; 6) to fight for adequate constitutional provisions for Assam, specifically in the article 371 of the Indian constitution; 7) to make Assam free of foreigners; 8) to work for adequate constitutional provisions and lawful security for the political, economic, social, cultural and heritage of Assam; 9) to work for the development of the many indigenous tribes and socially backward people; 10) to promote universal brotherhood, fraternity among all the people of Assam; 11) to establish gram swaraj.<sup>119</sup> The political party of KMSS aims to be politically federal, economically self-reliant, socially inclusive and build scientific temperament among the people of Assam.<sup>120</sup> Akhil Gogoi, who contested from the Sibsagar constituency in the Assam assembly elections of 2021, won the elections becoming the first person in Assam to ever win an assembly seat from the jail premises without physical campaigning.

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<sup>118</sup> The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the Asom Jatiyotabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) who played an active role in the anti CAA protests jointly announced their new political party, Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) on September 17, 2020, ahead of the assembly election in 2021. AJP has sworn to commit itself towards the development of all the communities of Assam. With the tagline 'Assam First, Always and Ever' and slogan 'Ghore Ghore Aami' (We are in every household) AJP which have a strong nexus of students and youths, makes it regionalist in its focus and orientation.

<sup>119</sup> Constitution, Rajjor Dal.

<sup>120</sup> Constitution, Rajjor Dal.

Although the prime issue which KMSS engaged in this period was CAB and CAA, the organisation significantly continued its struggle against existing problems of the region. The NHPC's mega Subansiri hydro power project which was stalled in 2011 restarted its work in 2019 after a wait of over 8 years. KMSS instantly launched a resistance movement to stop the construction of the alleged 2000 MW dam. It again outcried the repercussion of the dam on the lives and property of the people in the downstream areas of Assam.<sup>121</sup> It engaged in other socio-economic and political issues of Assam like mobilising against incessant price rise, malpractices in government departments, basic rights of OLA/UBER drivers etc.

In March 2015, while criticizing the Congress led government of Assam because of its rampant corruption and failing to meet the needs of the common people, KMSS which was swearing by its non-affiliation and non-alignment to political parties<sup>122</sup> declared that it would be launching a new political party namely *Gana Mukti Sangram Asom*.<sup>123</sup> Thus, its stand to take the parliamentary route started developing towards 2015 and the bringing of the CAB in 2016 and subsequent incarceration of its prime leader Akhil Gogoi, maybe made KMSS more particular in its orientation towards parliamentary politics. Thus, in the later stage KMSS became more engaged with the national question of Assam. There was a complete unidirectional shift to the national issue of Assam- the question of citizenship which has been a long standing issue in the society and polity of the region. The peasant organisation felt that there was a dire need of a regional political party in Assam who will work for all sections of the Assamese population in tune with the regional sentiments.

### **Contextualizing Peasant Struggle of KMSS**

It has been discussed the many factors which led to the rise of KMSS as an independent and major organisation of the peasants in Assam. The causes have long been void in the peasant scenario of Assam. The issue of migration and citizenship has been considered as a threat to the indigenous communities of Assam. What has been missing was identifying the

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<sup>121</sup>Kalita, K. (2019, October 17). Assam: Anti dam bodies threaten stir to stop Subansiri dam work. Times of India. Accessed <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-anti-dam-bodies-threaten-stir-to-stop-subansiri-dam-work/articleshow/71627427.cms> on 20.01.2020.

<sup>122</sup> Akhil Gogoi even expressed discontent to the idea of Arvind Kejriwal, who in 2011 decided to form the Aam Aadmi Party

<sup>123</sup> The party was founded on the 4<sup>th</sup> second yearly conference KMSS at Moranhat, Assam by Akhil Gogoi in presence of Anna Hazare.

deprived on community/ethnicity background and not from the perspective of a peasant. Where identity has been central to the politics, society and developmental prospects of Assam throughout history, peasants have been left out for long from this prolonged debate of the repercussions of migration. Identity groups in Assam have formed their respective struggles centered on their community becoming a minority in their own land. The fear of losing their identity with their own indigenous culture and custom which they regard it as sacred, in their own land, was more contested and debated. The Assam Movement (1979-1985) focused more on the issue of the Assamese becoming a minority in their own land. Though 'land' was considered an important issue it was considered as a determinant of identity, yet the very idea of it, being the bread of the peasant, seems to have lost in the course of identity politics. Peasant politics was taken to a larger narrative, in various manifestations and largely contextual.

The emergence of a contemporary peasant agenda marked the entry of a different form of peasant organisation in terms of its content and scope. The birth of KMSS at gunpoint, was depictive of the crisis in the economic, social, cultural and political life of the peasant in Assam. The crisis was borne out of the effects of globalisation. The ability of the organisation to take peasant issues in its entirety- arising from corruption, migration, environment protection, rights of the peasants on the natural resources, land rights of the indigenous people and not just confined to land reforms and land rights made the organisation dynamic with mass appeal. This was considered necessary by KMSS to disperse among the crowd and build itself as a mass organisation. Though the peasant organisation started off with basic peasant issues of the peasants, this was done keeping into account the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions of the state.

The era of globalisation has left not only a socio-economic crisis but also cultural and environmental crisis in the life of a common peasant. Peasant issues and grievances are largely contextual and do not solely depend on land rights and land reforms in the globalising era. Also contextualizing peasant struggle do not mean situating in the context, rather it involves understanding the way it developed. The development was relative to the crisis of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. The colonial exploitation of peasant land still exists, but the nature of exploitation has taken a new route in the globalizing era, engulfed

with many issues. The development of KMSS which followed was manifested in its constitution as well as its struggle. While major issues concerning vital for the region was mostly taken up by KMSS, this was seen as a part of its larger peasant struggle as committed in its constitution. This was quintessential for any movement to survive. As Gail Omvedt has argued that transformation of a society is possible only when a movement tries to encapsulate all the issues ranging from environmental to developmental as well as the question of exploitation of labour of women and peasants.<sup>124</sup> The following chapters will be an exploration of the significant trends of KMSS's politics and its struggle.

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<sup>124</sup> This observation has been made by Omvedt with regard to the Anti-caste movement and Dalit politics from Jyotirao Phule to Bhimrao Ambedkar to the politics of Bahujan Samaj Party. See Omvedt, G. (2013). *The Anti-caste Movement and the Discourse of Power* . In N. G. Jayal, *Democracy in India* (pp. 481-508). New Delhi : Oxford University Press.



## Chapter Three

### Processes of Mobilisation and Radicalisation:

#### Trends of Peasant Politics- I

As has been discussed in the last chapter the growth of KMSS was an outcome and result of diverse factors which have assumed new tendencies in the era of globalisation. We have seen the growth of KMSS over the years as a mass peasant organisation. What led to its growth was not only the core issues for which it fights but also the social, environmental and cultural crisis in a peasant's life because of globalisation. It was seen in the last chapter that peasant grievances are less centered on conventional 'agrarian issues' and have assumed a whole new phenomenon in the neo-liberal era. But the sustainability of an organisation not only depends on the broad objectives it aims to achieve but also the larger nature of mobilisation and methods of resistance among the peasants. It also depends to a considerable extent on the means adopted by the organisation to secure its objectives. These, however are the different manifestation of agrarian crisis in the era of globalisation. With many different objectives and diverse issues at hand, KMSS has taken definite and defined patterns of mobilisation over the years. While it has been seen that the growth of KMSS depends to a considerable extent on its ability to address diverse issues pertaining to the region, it also depends to a considerable extent on the nature of its politics. The politics of KMSS entails a serious inquiry into its nature of mobilisation and radicalisation in the neo-liberal era. Its politics is suggestive of definite practices as well as strategies of the organisation. The 'means' adopted for its resistance and the nature of mobilisation of KMSS indicates its nature as an organisation. Ghanshyam Shah finds inadequacy in Kathleen Gough's classification of peasant revolts which was made taking into basis the 'goals, ideology and methods' of the peasant organisation rather than the strategies adopted by the peasant organisation.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the principal reasons for peasant revolt is not enough, the strategies and styles adopted for mobilizing the peasants is also very important. By strategies, I put emphasis on the 'means' employed to attain the goals which is one of the defining criteria of a social

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<sup>1</sup> Shah, G. (2001). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 42.

movement.<sup>2</sup> T. K. Oommen while exploring the ‘means’ as an important criteria for the understanding of a social movement, says that it is important to understand and recognize the kind of means one employs to pursue their goals- which are violent or non-violent.<sup>3</sup> But what Oommen fails to explain is that under what circumstances or situation a movement is non-violent or turns violent? Is the ‘means’ adopted or employed a pre-defined strategy or contextual? These are also some questions which is important to consider.

The processes of mobilisation and radicalisation is suggestive of two distinct trends a) the manner in which KMSS has been able to attract people into its ambit or the way it draws popular attention of the masses towards its agendas and goals b) the way it shapes the discourse of politics of KMSS. Debal K. Singha Roy argues that the trends of mobilisation of peasants have transformed from extreme forms of mobilisation to institutionalized mobilisation because radical mobilisations are not sustained for a longer period of time.<sup>4</sup> Emphasizing on the specific trends of mobilisation, the chapter will depict how the peasants participate in the struggle. The means adopted by KMSS do not only suggest the nature of their protests but also the manner in which peasants participate on a large scale. The chapter will analyze the means, strategies and trends of mobilisation of KMSS, the nature of its dissent and protests. While understanding this nature, it also brings into forefront the nature of the state’s approach to KMSS.

KMSS’s nature of resistance over the years has taken many different forms. It has adopted techniques that are unique and instrumental in making a mass appeal among people and where the latter itself turns into a part of the process. The present chapter seeks to proceed with the question- How do we comprehend the nature of the political struggle of

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<sup>2</sup> The other three defining criteria of a social movement are- goals, scope and content as identified by T. K. Oommen by analyzing the available scholarship on social movements by the sociologists. See Oommen, T. K. (2010). *Social Movements I: Issues of Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Oommen, T. K. (2010). *Social Movements I: Issues of Identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Singha Roy takes into account three peasant movements, viz. the Telangana, Tebhaga and the Naxalite movement. Understanding the role of the peasantry in the emerging social structure as well as in the political processes, Singha Roy analyzes the way these radical peasant movements in history because of the transformation from radicalisation to institutionalized mobilisation has affected the forms of their mobilisation, organisation, ideological orientation as well as their inner dynamics. Singha Roy argues that this institutionalization has re-instated altogether new patterns of domination, subordination and dependency. Singharoy, K. D. (2004). *Peasant’s Movement in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilisation and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

KMSS and how does this actually materializes when comes in contact with the state? For clarity, the chapter is divided into three sections. The first will give a broad analysis of the various methods adopted by KMSS as means of popular resistance and mobilisation so far. This will depict the nature of struggle of KMSS. The second section will undergo a critical understanding of the feasibility of these methods in its struggle so far and the way KMSS has exercised these methods. The third section will understand the approach of the state on the nature of the KMSS's protests. The discussion in the chapter seeks to provide an understanding on the nature of resistance of KMSS, why it follows a shared path and the approach of the neo-liberal state towards the same. This will also throw light as to the way a neo-liberal state functions when it comes to confront peasant resistance.

### **3.1 Methods of KMSS**

The idea of 'peasant resistance' in history has been analyzed as an active and dynamic force having the potential of exerting massive influence on the state. Barrington Moore describes the Indian peasant as 'traditionally docile' and 'passive'.<sup>5</sup> Peasants in India have been expressive on putting forth their demands and their struggle throughout has been indicative of a united force.<sup>6</sup> Peasants have been non-violent, aggressive, revolutionary, passive or active; their way of dissenting has been relative of time, place and circumstances. In the post independence era peasant struggle has taken two definite routes. First, it is institutional in character; it is affiliated to parliamentary political parties like the AIKS. This kind of struggle largely adheres to disciplined and institutionalized course, where the propaganda lies mainly in bargaining and negotiating with the government. It believes that the upliftment of the peasants and the downtrodden can only be achieved by sticking on to the parliamentary path. The other route that peasant struggle has taken is revolutionary in character. This is largely based on the discontent that has risen due to the deteriorating conditions of the peasants by the successive regimes of the government. It believes in armed struggle, for the greater improvement of the lives of the peasants, can also be achieved by

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<sup>5</sup> See Moore, B. (1967). *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship*. London: Allen Lane.

<sup>6</sup> Peasants and peasant consciousness have not only been a part of their own struggle but also a greater part of the Indian National Movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mridula Mukherjee depicts how peasants were a major force in the National Movement. See Mukherjee, M. (2004). *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.



radical revolution. The Naxalbari movement of India is one such example. The revolutionary path is adopted when peasants seek to end extreme forms of domination and exploitation historically meted out to them. This way, for the peasantry, seems to be more liberating by immediately overthrowing the landed bourgeoisie and landlords, under whom they have been subjugated. Taking violent means as its mode of resistance, believing it having the potential of bringing about radical changes, revolutionary seems to be the only liberating method for a section of the peasantry. Contrary to this, peasants have also resorted to non violent means to protest. In India, peasants have also resorted to the Gandhian way, a non-violent and a passive way to resist and voice their dissent. This path, in India, is largely attributed to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi whose political weapons of ‘non-violence’, ‘satyagraha’ were used by many as a ‘means’ to achieve their objectives. The Gandhian methods were employed to passively pressurize the government to meet its demands.

Since 2005, KMSS has taken the route of its struggle in different manners in terms of its protests, resistance and mobilisation. Udayon Misra has commented that the KMSS has added a completely new dimension to the politics of protests in Assam accompanied by mass support.<sup>7</sup> Akhil Gogoi said, “Our primary aim is to raise political consciousness of the people of Assam. But by political consciousness most of the people mean consciousness of parliamentary democracy. We are talking of elevating democratic consciousness. In democracy, the main means of ensuring participation of greatest number of people and to eradicate poverty is mass movement”.<sup>8</sup> Akhil Gogoi told that KMSS aims to start a people’s movement in Assam to fight for the rights. So, mass movement has been primarily a means for achieving its objectives and fighting for the rights of the people, whilst it is also perceived as a democratic practice of ensuring participation in the largest number. In December 2011, when the further construction of Lower Subansiri Hydro electric power project was stalled because of massive protests from KMSS and other organisations, Akhil Gogoi said, “The construction stopped because we were fighting on the streets”.<sup>9</sup> The entire process of disseminating into the crowd of people can be seen through some specified techniques that it

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<sup>7</sup> See Misra, U. (2011). A New Edge to People’s Protests in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (28), 16-18.

<sup>8</sup> [Krishi%20Mukti%20Sangram%20Samiti,%20Assam\\_%20A%20brief%20note%20and%20an%20interview%20with%20Akhil%20Gogoi%20at%20Sanhati.html](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iS7W9LLEepU&t=3s)

<sup>9</sup> Accessed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iS7W9LLEepU&t=3s> on 14.02.2018.

has adopted. Where the means to assert its ideas and opinions are different; the nature of expressing are also different. This section will highlight the various ways through which KMSS over the years has been organizing themselves and the way it catches the popular imagination of the general public. The methods of KMSS symbolize the nature of its struggle, the politics of mass protests and the way it is carrying the movement in the era of globalisation.

### **A) The Democratic Practice**

Often being termed as ‘professional agitationists’ by the intelligentsia,<sup>10</sup> KMSS most often resorts to a democratic method of working in the public. Democratic methods largely comply with the institutional, constitutional and Gandhian ways of protesting and mobilizing the masses. Some of the democratic methods adopted by KMSS are discussed below

#### **Hunger strike**

Hunger strikes have served as an effective means of resistance everywhere around the world. ‘Hunger Strike’ is generally taken as a form of ‘passive resistance’, where one surrenders his own self for achieving a certain goal. The tradition of a ‘passive resistance’ started with Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi where it was adopted as a tool to voice dissent and express discontent. KMSS has adopted this particular method in expressing discontent time and over again. In 2011, the organisation was an active participant in the India Against Corruption movement led by Anna Hazare. The popular movement for the creation of an ombudsman (Lokpal) to arrest and detain government officials on charges of corruption started in New Delhi in 2011 with tremendous support from Akhil Gogoi and KMSS. This passive way of exerting pressure on the state to review its decisions or policies has proved useful for the organisation many times. Some have proved fruitful yet to an extent. Akhil Gogoi, who was arrested on December 2019, amidst anti-CAA protests started indefinite hunger strike within the jail premises from March 1, 2020.<sup>11</sup> It has been the first and last resort to its struggle. It went on a fast along with SSMSS demanding increase in the wages of

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<sup>10</sup> See Barbora, S. (2011). Assam’s New Voice of Dissent. *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVI (28), 19-22.

<sup>11</sup> East Mojo News Bureau. (2020, February 25). *Jailed KMSS leader Akhil Gogoi to sit on hunger strike from March 1*. East Mojo. Accessed <https://www.eastmojo.com/assam/2020/02/25/jailed-kmss-leader-akhil-gogoi-to-sit-on-hunger-strike-from-mar-1-on-5.9.2020>.

tea garden workers.<sup>12</sup> An indefinite hunger strike was observed by its leader, Akhil Gogoi in 2012 demanding immediate closure of ongoing dam work at the Subansiri, which was supported by many sections of the society.<sup>13</sup>

Akhil Gogoi started indefinite hunger strike protesting against the construction of Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Power project on May 2012. On the sixth day of the strike, the police forcibly picked Akhil Gogoi from the site and admitted to the GMCH.<sup>14</sup> There was a chaos among the public following the incident of Akhil Gogoi. KMSS immediately blocked the national highways in Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Tinisukia, Nagoan, Morigaon, Kamrup, Darrang and Sonitpur districts of Assam. The public started mass protests against the arrest of Gogoi in Titabor, Selenghaat, Nahorkotia, Chabua, Roha, Pathshala, Jorxagor, Charaideo, Borahi, Sofrai and Kolong. On seeing the massive protests throughout Assam, the police deployed tear gas shells and lathi charge on the protesting crowds of KMSS.<sup>15</sup> We have witnessed in history how the non-violent way of protesting have always ended in violence like the non-cooperation movement of 1920s which was immediately called off by Gandhi because of the large scale violence. Judith M. Brown notes that Gandhi's passive resistance was principled and disciplined; he 'masterminded the way campaigns were conducted and escalated' and 'actually vetted the people who were allowed to participate'.<sup>16</sup> This detailed planning and execution of Gandhi's passive resistance was unique to him, which has been absent in the hunger strikes observed by KMSS. Though hunger strikes have been publicly employed by KMSS, it has never been principled and disciplined and lacked the very ethos of Gandhi. It was just resorted as a non-violent means which had the moral sanction of the public.

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<sup>12</sup> The Staff Reporter. (2015, April 3). KMSS begins Hunger Strike. *The Sentinel*, Retrieved from [sentinelassam.com](http://sentinelassam.com)

<sup>13</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010-March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 144. The Hunger strike got support from the civil society, the literary and intellectual forum and many different organisations.

<sup>14</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 147.

<sup>15</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 147-149.

<sup>16</sup> See Brown, J. M. (2011). Gandhi as Nationalist Leader, 1915-1948. In J. M. Parel, *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi* (pp. 51-70). New York: Cambridge University Press.

## **Dharna**

‘Dharna’ as Jay Narain Sharma says, ‘is an ancient institution of India’.<sup>17</sup> Dharnas have proved to be an effective means of not only dissenting but also of compelling the offender of agreeing to the demands put forward. Dharnas, nonviolent in nature, are sit-in protests at offices, institutions, industries to meet the demands of the peasants or to any kind of injustice meted out. Generally it is mode of compelling payment or compliance, by sitting at the debtor’s or offender’s door until the demand is complied with.<sup>18</sup> Peaceful in its demonstration, yet powerfully assertive, KMSS has adopted this direct action mode very often appealing justice for the peasants and workers. It may be noted that Dharnas cannot be totally said to be effective in nature but by way of sitting in is a way of showing one’s disagreement with some issues by holding a mass sit-on, capturing public attention by refusing to leave the place. KMSS has reacted on many discrepancies or inconsistencies with many development projects or various departments of the state and also with industrial enterprises and organisations. Many a times, KMSS has resorted to dharnas in its regular protests for the rights of the peasantry and workers of Assam. On 29<sup>th</sup> September of 2013, KMSS resorted to a massive public dharna in front of the Agricultural department at Khanapara, Guwahati for adequate prices of jute leaves at the market. As reported, the said dharna led by KMSS was attended by peasants from Dhubri, Barpeta, Darrang, Nagaon districts, who were not getting minimum prices of jute leaves at the market, despite bearing heavy costs at the time of cultivation.<sup>19</sup> On 12<sup>th</sup> October of 2018, KMSS led a massive dharna in front of the District Commissioner’s office at Kamrup Metropolitan for incessant price rise of essential commodities.

## **Right to Information**

The most effective medium that KMSS has exercised is the Right to Information (RTI), where the organisation has brought to public light many corruption scandals and malpractices in the government departments. The Right to Information Act, 2005 is an act by the Indian

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<sup>17</sup> See Sharma, J. N. (2008). *Rediscovering Gandhi. Satyagraha: Gandhi’s Approach to Conflict Resolution*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Accessed from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/dharna> on 07.12.2018.

<sup>19</sup> See Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 96-97.

Parliament where under the provisions of the act, an Indian citizen can request information from the government. The RTI act which came into force on 12 October, 2005, was enacted by the Indian parliament to secure to promote transparency and accountability in the public services. This political method is an active platform for bringing out required information on the basis of requesting an appeal. Popularly known as an ‘RTI activist’ Akhil Gogoi,<sup>20</sup> the General Secretary of KMSS, very often uses this method to bring to light corruption cases or any other government information on its request. In its fight against corruption, KMSS most often adopts this method to bring into public light the corruption cases of ministries, politicians, syndicate and many others. The peasant organisation has effectively been using the RTI since 2006, only after few months the act came into force. Through RTI, KMSS has brought out many corruption cases mainly related to National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), Public Distribution System (PDS), coal syndicate in Assam, panchayat and rural development etc. The first application for RTI was made on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March, 2006 requesting information on Gomariguri Development Block of Golaghat district before the Deputy Commissioner. Many facts on corruption came to light and KMSS took out mass rallies after that.<sup>21</sup> Akhil Gogoi in his book, *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*, regards RTI as a significant right granted to the people which enable the common man to participate in the democratic process.<sup>22</sup> Gogoi discusses at length the many different kinds of rights that comes with RTI like a) the right to elicit information from the government; b) the right to ask questions to institutions which are financially dependent on the government; c) the right to extract a copy of the same; d) the right to examine government documents; e) to invigilate any government work and f) to extract a specimen/sample of any used item in any work.<sup>23</sup>

The main idea of adopting this method is to function within the idea of established government acts and laws, thereby making the public informed of the alleged activities of the government. This very idea of bringing awareness to the people through democratic devices,

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<sup>20</sup> Over the years Akhil Gogoi is popularly known today as an ‘RTI activist’. Many leading newspapers refer Gogoi as an “RTI activist”

<sup>21</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 167. Akhil Gogoi though says that the RTI is only a right given to the people to extract any information or detail. It does not provide a way to combat the illegal activities or doesn’t provides an answer to them.

<sup>23</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash , p. 168

initiated by the state, is a kind of protest that attempts to stick within the set democratic and institutional values of the state.

### **Raij mels**

'*Raij*' meaning 'people' and '*mel*' meaning 'meeting' is a public meeting which have been important for KMSS to debate and discuss on crucial issues and also enlighten the public at large. Public meetings or *raij mels* are old social and political institutions of Assam which are symbolic, for these kinds of gatherings are organised at cities and at important places which attract public attention. What follows in gatherings are speeches, slogans, with the support of the crowd. The people anticipate a lot to these gatherings where their political orientation on larger issues takes place. *Raij-mels* or mass-meetings occupy an important place even in the history of Assam. The importance of *raij-mels* and to discuss and deliberate was seen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Phulaguri Dhewa and Patharughator Ran.<sup>24</sup> *Raij Mels* have been an important part of discussion in the history of peasant uprisings in colonial Assam. The organisation has organised gatherings in rural Assam during its protests against forcible eviction drives, ill effects of large dams, CAB/CAA spreading awareness among the rural public.

### **Press Meets/Reports and Memorandums**

Another important political tool of KMSS has been its press conferences it organises from time to time on any significant and crucial issue which require immediate attention. A medium which reaches out to the people in the remotest, press conferences have proved to be effective not only by sending its messages to the public but generating a larger consciousness among the people. Electronic and print media has been effective in generating larger consciousness, and upholding its stand on any issue. In 2011 there were a total of 102 press releases, in 2012 it was 93, in 2013, 158; and in 2014 KMSS has given approximately 142 releases. The press conferences came in the nature of expression, condemnation, assertion, exposing scandals, corruption and the like. Through its particular reliability on media and press, KMSS has asserted its democratic agenda very often.

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<sup>24</sup> This has been discussed in chapter 1.

Besides the press, regular petitions/memorandums have become a major political tool of KMSS over the years. Whenever there has been a major issue of concern, KMSS addresses formal letters to the concerned department of the ministry or person seeking immediate attention on a certain issue. Many letters were addressed to the Prime Minister of India and the Chief Minister of Assam as well. During 5 years, from March 2010 to March 2015, KMSS have submitted 86 memorandums to the government and the state on varied socio-political and economic issues concerning Assam and its people as a whole. Though petitions are generally understood to be an appeal or a formal request, KMSS's petitions are mostly in the form of demands made on the state to address any relevant issue. When Akhil Gogoi was arrested many times by the government, petitions by KMSS demanded the immediate release of Akhil Gogoi. Most of the demands put forward, seek immediate attention; its nature ranging from simple peasant grievances to major socio-economic and political concerns of the region as for example the deposition submitted to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on May, 2018 on the repercussions of CAB, 2016. Through petitions, the organisation addresses not only its demands but also the dissatisfaction over many issues. Petitions have become a strong medium to express its voice, opinion and a formal way to address the pertinent issues. But it also remains the formal way of bringing to notice the issues raised by KMSS.

### **Writings**

A very effective medium for KMSS have been its books by its leader Akhil Gogoi. Writing often plays a very positive role in reaching out to the people. Voices of dissent are very often expressed in written form. Akhil Gogoi, tries to reach out to the people by putting forward his views and opinions by writing books. Over the years, Gogoi's work has been a medium to reach out to the people. These books range from the peasant's crisis to the organisation's ideology, agenda, the state's inability to handle crisis, to bringing out the corruption cases of the government from time to time. Till 2018, Akhil Gogoi has solely penned<sup>25</sup> over five (5) books, viz. *Poribortonor Akhora*, *Gana Sangramor Dinlipi*, *Marubhumi Aahe Lahe Lahe*, *Bideshi Xomoshya aru Jatiyo Aandolanar Path* and *Axomia*

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<sup>25</sup> Akhil Gogoi has co-authored one book with Geetashree Tamuly, which is on the life and times of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla.

*Jatiyotabaad*. These books are a message to the public on important issues of public importance. Besides, they also act as tools of political orientation of the public. Akhil Gogoi started writing in 2012, and all the books have become the bestseller.<sup>26</sup> The books have gone to two to three editions which are written in Assamese. While it is only Akhil Gogoi, who have penned down the books on the regional issues of Assam, the books represents KMSS's orientation on larger national issues of Assam. This nature of reaching out to people, by penning one's thoughts have proved as an effective medium using print medium to reach out to people. The books clarifies KMSS's stand, puts its opinion and expresses its broader agendas at large. It has been another medium to reach out to people. It is a reflection of the ideas and Valerian Rodrigues states that the 'written word' enables one to reach to a larger world, conferring some degree of permanence or immortality to the writer.<sup>27</sup> Gogoi's writings have played the role of an educator to spread his message about the principles, goals, ideology of him and KMSS. Dharmeswar Saikia of Doyang says Gogoi's writings have been a positive catalyst in spreading the ideas, ideals of KMSS among the masses.<sup>28</sup> His writings also clarify his stand of the many accusations it has been labeled from time to time.

### **Posters and banners/Display banners**

Posters and banners have been a part of every organisation, institution, political party all over the world. The role that posters and banners have come to play in the popular imagination of the public is pivotal. Posters not only express one's concern; it also tries to disseminate its message and ideas to the general public. At popular sites of protests, a poster generally is a message and the voice of the people which is being displayed. Posters expresses the concern of the people, it says without being spoken and is very much expressive on that front. The posters and banners of the numerous rallies of KMSS have been displayed to silently yet strongly express their voice of dissent.

### **Slogans**

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<sup>26</sup> In the Northeast Book Fair, November 2018, Akhil Gogoi's 'Axomiya Jatiyatabad' was one of the bestseller .

<sup>27</sup> Valerian Rodrigues in this context analyzes the essential writings of B. R. Ambedkar. The writings of B.R. Ambedkar gave him a certain sort of distinctiveness which otherwise was only appropriated by the upper castes and the Brahmins. See Rodrigues, V. (2004) ed. *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Dharmeswar Saikia, personal communication, January 3, 2021.



Slogans generally are to be understood as a medium and voice of dissent. Slogans have become the popular method of the masses more significantly of the vast number of peasants and workers. Since it is vocal in nature it automatically carries their message. It is the slogans where they demand, express and capture public attention. Though slogans are revolutionary in character but they are also peaceful. While most slogans are in the form of demands like “Release Akhil Gogoi”, “Withdraw CAB from Assam”, “Give us land pattas” opinions and judgements like “We oppose CAB” “Assam rejects CAB” can also be figured in the protest areas of KMSS. Slogans have not only been in the nature of demands for rights but also strong expression of the dissent. What is interesting is that it is only after the leaders have given slogans, the masses follow. The supervision and direction of the leaders in carrying out the slogans is important. In the protest rallies after every slogans or shout which expresses hard dissent and dissatisfaction of the protesting crowd is followed up with a slogan which validates their attachment to their land and Assam. For example, after every slogan of KMSS cursing the BJP like “BJP haai haai” or the CAA “CAA baatil korok” (Scrap CAA) they ends up with Joi Aai Axom (Glory to Mother Assam).

### **Rallies**

Mass rallies are demonstrative of united effort by the people on their discontent with the state or any institution or organisation. These rallies signify a peaceful and nonviolent act where the people participating send out a message to the society and the onlookers the motive behind such a gathering. Walkers or Marchers generally holds posters and banners, and attempt at either creating mass awareness or a silent display of their dissent. Silent marches like torch rallies have been regularly taken out and have proved symbolic in demonstrating the organisation’s combined strength. These marches and rallies are generally taken out in the city and major towns of Assam.

### **Protests songs and poems**

Protest songs have been an important part in the struggle of KMSS. People sang protest songs for their rights and made them their popular culture in Tengani, the place popularly known as the father of KMSS. The songs portrays varied issues of their struggle ranging from the controversial CAA to domestic and social issues such as domestic violence,

women's education to promoting peace, equality, fraternity and universal brotherhood. A poem of Khagen Das, 'The youths of Tengani' (translated by self from Assamese 'Tenganir Gabharu) may be significant at this point

*I am the youth of Tengani  
Not afraid of anyone  
Will continue the struggle  
I am the youth of Tengani  
We don't need Hengdang, nor sword  
But fight with reason for our struggle  
I am the youth of Tengani.  
Will take the path of nonviolence  
Not afraid of the police and the army  
Not afraid of the double faced minister.  
I am the youth of Tengani.  
Will take courage by my heart  
If Tengani dies, I too will  
But won't leave the struggle  
I am the youth of Tengani  
Will sacrifice everything for the motherland  
I am not a foreigner or a Bangladeshi Miya  
I am born in Tengani, I am a landed Assamese  
I am the youth of Tengani.<sup>29</sup>*

Another song "The Burning Assam" by Khagen Das written in 2016, (Translated by self from Assamese 'Ognigorva Axom') is noteworthy...

*Assam is burning today  
For the 2016 Citizenship Bill  
Today Assam is burning  
They have taken the peace from the indigenous people*

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<sup>29</sup> Das, K. (2020). *Hojaag*. Jorhat: Digdarshan Prakashan, p. 30.

*Their two square means and sleep.  
If the bill becomes an act, the indigenous will be left homeless  
For poet Binanda Chandra Baruah-*

*It is not very far when the foreigners will come  
To enjoy our feast  
The masses don't have their representative  
The government of the masses  
Are confused with power  
The land of peace have turned into chaos  
The native-foreigner issue have started yet again  
Today Assam is burning again.<sup>30</sup>*

These protest songs were widely sung in the meetings of Tengani during evictions. The collection of poems by Khagen Das was printed in the form of a book in 2020. People also sang their songs in the protest sites for the release of Akhil Gogoi.

## **B) KMSS as a pressure group**

KMSS has evolved as a pressure group, fighting for the interests of the landless peasants, destitute and the workers. Its role as an intermediary between the government and the society has been proved effective sometime whilst it has also been provocative. The construction of the 2000 MW dam at Subansiri was stalled as a result of the immense pressure exerted by the peasant organisation in 2011. The National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) also temporarily closed down the toll gate at Raha<sup>31</sup> on National Highway (NH) 37 because of the mounting pressure of the KMSS.<sup>32</sup> The tactics to exert pressure on the government and the state is explained in the following discussion...

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<sup>30</sup> Das, K. (2020). *Hojaag*. Jorhat: Digdarshan Prakashan, p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> Raha is a small town in the Nagaon district of Assam near the National Highway number 37 of Assam.

<sup>32</sup> Along with KMSS there was the Asom Jatiyabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) who exerted pressure on the NHAI. NE Now News. (2018, July 22). *NHAI bows to KMSS pressure , to close down toll gate for 24 hours*. Northeast Now. Retrieved from <https://nenow.in/north-east-news/assam/nhai-bows-kmss-pressure-close-toll-gate-24-hours.html>.

## Bandh

Bandh or ‘proposed holiday’ is an activity to disrupt the normal working and functioning of state offices, businesses, institutions and organisations for a day or a number of days as may be declared. The Cambridge Dictionary defines a ‘bandh’ as ‘an occasion when offices, businesses, schools, etc. close for a day and people stop working in order to show that they disagree with something or to show respect’.<sup>33</sup> The Oxford Dictionaries says ‘bandh’ is ‘a general strike’.<sup>34</sup> The organisers of bandh or the ‘general strike’ tries to disrupt the functioning of the state by preventing the running of the motor vehicles at the very start of the day. Bandh has been a common way of protesting in Assam. Over the years many different organisations have resorted to this particular method of dissenting, be it revolutionary organisations or formal popular organisations. KMSS has also resorted to this method quite often, have implemented region-wide bandhs to protest against many issues of grave concern. To roll back the controversial CAB, KMSS along with 44 other organisations implemented a region wide bandh in Assam on 23<sup>rd</sup> of October, 2018. Though this is only a means to protest, implementation of a region-wide bandh requires active participation. To adopt this method means greater participation of its members. Bandh’s though not considered a legal way of dissenting, KMSS adopts this method at times when the situation seems crucial for the welfare of its people. Through bandh, it disrupts normal functioning of the day-to-day life, hampering office work and educational institutions. An organisation which follows institutional mechanisms as political tools; KMSS believes organizing bandhs are to bring a matter of immediate concern to effect. But most of the concerns for which it organises the bandhs are not really effective. Such acts can be termed as ‘symbolic’, for what it does is to capture the popular attention of the masses on a particular issue and shows its disagreement with the state on any issue. KMSS declared statewide bandh on the death of 3 people in a violent clash with the police in a major protest rally on land rights in 2011.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Accessed from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bandh> on 9.11.2018

<sup>34</sup> Accessed from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/bandh> on 9.11.2018

<sup>35</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010-March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 83.

Sometimes the peasant organisation also warned of prolonged bandhs if its demands were not met at the earliest.<sup>36</sup>

## **Gherao**

Gherao in Hindi language meaning ‘encirclement’ is capturing a public office, an institution and organisation from all the sides until the demands are met. The Oxford Dictionary defines Gherao as ‘a protest in which workers prevent employers or managers from leaving a place of work until certain demands are met.’<sup>37</sup> The Cambridge again defines Gherao as ‘an occasion when people show that they disagree with something by standing around a person in authority and not letting them leave until they agree to do what the people want.’<sup>38</sup> Gheraos as a method of protest have been adopted on a large scale in India by labor and trade unions since the days of colonialism. Gheraos signify two basic characteristics- first, it is a method adopted by the working class group and second, gheraos are adopted until demands are met. Gheraos are often employed by KMSS on matters of urgent importance. On 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2013, KMSS gheraoed the District Commissioner’s office of Kamrup Rural for not taking legal steps and punishment against the land mafias- Suresh Pritani, Kailash Lohia and Ram Bukaria who were illegally taking vast amount of peasant land for their corporate business. The next day it again gheraoed the office to immediately arrest the same who were a threat to the peasant land and demanding land pattas to the indigenous peasantry of Assam.<sup>39</sup> On 27<sup>th</sup> September of 2013, KMSS gheraoed the Sarusajai Stadium of Guwahati, where officials of Assam Power Distribution Company Limited were in a two day meeting in a bid to increase the power tariffs of households in Assam by 37 percent.<sup>40</sup>

## **Road/railway blockade**

KMSS has resorted to blockade of national highways and rails as a last resort to force the decision makers arrive at a fair decision. On June 10, 2011, when the forest department

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<sup>36</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010-March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 139.

<sup>37</sup> Accessed from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/gherao> on 13.11.2018.

<sup>38</sup> Accessed from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/gherao> on 13.10.2018.

<sup>39</sup> See Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 92-94.

<sup>40</sup> See Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 98.

along with the police and CRPF went on an eviction drive of housing dwellings of the people of Gorchuk area near Guwahati, thousands of angry protestors immediately blocked the national highway and stopped the ply of vehicles. The forest department instantly stopped further evictions for the day. But the sit-in-protestors demanded the presence of the District Commissioner of the Kamrup Metro district and wanted a written letter from the officials for the complete stoppage of evictions. The protestors who were armed with lathis were given support by a team of KMSS. ‘*Krishak Mukti Zindabaad*’ (Long live KMSS), ‘*Tarun Gogoi Sarkar Murdabaad*’ (Down with Tarun Gogoi’s government), ‘*Ussed bondho hobo lagibo*’ (evictions must be stopped) were the slogans which filled the air during their protests. After hours of blocking the national highway and disrupting the movement and transportation, the District Commissioner gave a written letter to the people of completely stopping further eviction drives in their areas.<sup>41</sup> It was later reported that during the blockade and dharna, there were loss and damage of many vehicles on the road. The anti-dam movement also witnessed major road blockades by the peasant organisation preventing the further transport of essentials to Arunachal Pradesh in order to stall the operation of the ongoing work at sites.

### **Naked protests**

KMSS staged naked protest at the premises of the Indian Parliament on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January, 2019 to protest against the CAB. Naked protests are rare in the society, for the first time the Northeast region witnessed was by the Manipuri women in 2004 against sexual violence and brutal killing of Thangjam Manorama by Assam Rifles. A group of farmers from Tamil Nadu on November 29, 2018 in New Delhi staged naked protests demanding basic amenities and waiver of loans. Naked protests is symbolic, indicates strength of the peasants to resort to their bodies as their most powerful strike. Though KMSS has resorted to this method only once, the very act of adopting this method was symbolic. The Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Indian Parliament) which passed the Citizenship Amendment Bill on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019 led to protests of such nature by KMSS. Nudity was taken as its last resort, in extreme cases, where one’s own body was involved to dissent and protest. On being asked to one of the protestors as to staging naked protest, he said, “*already the BJP government*

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<sup>41</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 77-78.

*with the CAB has made the Assamese people devastated and naked. Our act only symbolizes what BJP has done to us.*<sup>42</sup> This statement by a protestor expresses the hatred and anguish over BJP and the CAB. After this episode, its members have been involved in ‘half naked’ protests during the upsurge against CAB and CAA.

Most of these methods broadly attempts at mobilizing the people in urban areas. At the grassroots level, the members of KMSS have been mobilizing the people on their issues by reaching out to them. They talk, discuss matters and make them aware of the important issues and crisis of the state and its development practices. The awareness drive, mainly in the countryside, is carried by the active members of the organisation on significant and major issues of the region. Large campaigns and *raij mels* were organised by the members of KMSS throughout Assam in November and December 2019, against the ill-effects of CAB before Gogoi was arrested from Jorhat on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2019. It organises meetings in both the rural and the urban to create mass awareness among the public. Similar rallies and public meetings were done for spreading awareness of the downstream effects of the 2000 MW Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Power project. It holds discussion with the civil society organisations, state executive and intelligentsia of the state. A team of the organisation took the matter of the hazardous downstream impacts of large dams on Assam to the Prime Minister and the Union Ministry. It submits memorandums on every issue of the people of Assam to the government. It ordered strict punishment for the wrong doers, CBI enquiry into alleged corruption cases and adequate laws for the people. KMSS attempts to work within the legal boundaries of the state. The leaders of the organisation has gathered public and tried to mobilise the same on the issues of regional importance. It believes on the employability of sustainable methods for the future. Through these methods, KMSS has tried to work both as a civil/legal organisation and a pressure group.

KMSS has recently launched a new unique method of defying the government by staging a number of cultural protests throughout the region like singing ballads, reciting poems, displaying their artworks, formed human chains all at a time when its members were arrested and detained under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Many of them in its act of resentment shaved their heads in the public. In Dibrugarh, the peasants showed their

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<sup>42</sup> This was asked over phone in February of 2019. The identity is not disclosed here.

resentment over the arrest of Akhil Gogoi and the CAA by planting rice seedlings on their paddy fields.<sup>43</sup> The resistance of KMSS sometimes exhibited a silent demonstration of its resentment. Some youths even went to the extent of writing the posters in their own blood or displaying their *gamushas* amidst protesting. These new ways of defying the government decision and policies, have created new spaces of understanding peasant resistance. The angry protestors adopted many means to protest and show their resentment in a powerful manner. However these are not methods to exert pressure but a different manner of demonstration of their resentment and the larger issues and problems. The many different methods that KMSS employs are a mode of confronting the Indian state seeking justice from it and its many institutions. It asserts, pressurizes, holds meetings with the state to seek addressal of the grievances of the people. It believes in constant struggle, to bring to book and to meet the demands of the people.

So the political methods of KMSS can be understood in two ways-

- 1) It attempts to work within the legal boundaries of the state and the constitution. It has over the years legal and democratic practices as its modus operandi.
- 2) The methods as a pressure group are employed as a final resort to meet their demands, in an urgent situation of crisis.

### **3.2 The Nature of Peasant Politics**

To understand the political nature of KMSS, understanding the political methods is vital. Understanding the various factors which makes it all the more 'political'; or what influences the organisation to act or behave in a particular way is also important. The political tools provide the spaces for the peasants to articulate their demands and claims vividly and express dissatisfaction. Sometimes their modus operandi was an answer to the state. As has been discussed, the exploitation of the peasants was not only economic in nature. Peasants were and have been a victim of many other political, social and cultural factors that was more forceful in the era of globalisation. The nature of mobilisation of the

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<sup>43</sup> PTI, (2020. July 29). *Protests across Assam demanding release of activist Akhil Gogoi, repeal of CAA*. NDTV. Accessed <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/caa-protests-across-assam-demanding-release-of-activist-akhil-gogoi-repeal-of-caa-2270443> on 31.07.2020.



peasants under KMSS has taken a route which is a general consciousness or awareness on many different issues which directly or indirectly affect the lives of the peasants. The issues of migration, citizenship, corruption, privatisation, globalisation have adversely affected the lives of the peasants. All such issues require a general awareness of the masses which involved public meetings, gatherings, talks, writings and larger processes of democratization. Over the years KMSS have resolved to such processes which enable them to organise masses, generate larger consciousness and involve larger participation. Before KMSS was formed, Akhil Gogoi along with BTUSS and DMSS hold a long march which captured the popular imagination of the people. By way of confronting with the people on the way, Gogoi came to understand the core peasant issues of the people in the region. The act of forming a long march has been symbolic throughout. Peaceful in nature, it vehemently tried to capture the attention of the people and mobilise them for the common cause of securing land rights to the people. The very first attempt of the organisation of mobilizing peasants involved an active way of organizing people for a common cause. The mobilisation involved interaction and understanding the general worries of the people. So, from the popular understanding of peasant mobilisation as extreme forms of radicalisation and rebellion, which involves a different manner of confronting the state, this form of mobilisation of confronting the Indian state has been assertive and democratic.

Over the years, the forms of popular protest and dissent have mostly catered to the “democratic” methods which are largely non-violent, peaceful and disciplined in nature. Many times Akhil Gogoi has said that KMSS believes in democratic methods. Democratic methods so far have been taken to include passive forms of resistance, peaceful in nature and which acts in tune with the constitutional ethics and established democratic institutions. The emergence of the left forces in the political scenario of India has oriented the peasant struggle into nonviolent forces. Armed peasants with revolutionary tactics have gone underground, their struggle are lawfully labeled as undemocratic and unconstitutional. Revolutionary violence, of which peasants in history has adhered to is often contradictory to the state’s notion of ‘democracy’. There has been a tendency by the state to discard or label a peasant organisation as ‘unconstitutional’, ‘maoist’, ‘anti-national’ when the mobilisation is not in accordance with the ethics of the state. Akhil Gogoi has often been charged with sedition cases on grounds of instigating the public. As has been discussed, the revolutionary Marxist

path is condemned by the state in history since the colonial times. It became imperative for the 'left' to organise or take the path of parliamentary politics for its sustenance. KMSS has been caught within this vicious circle and has taken a path of democratic peasant politics with no affiliation of parliamentary parties.<sup>44</sup> State apparatus were present to suppress any kind of radical or revolutionary peasant mobilisation. Thus, often KMSS has opted for methods to mobilise and galvanize the masses driven mostly by the state's nature and apparatus controlling the political nature of the peasants.

Stressing its commitment to the same, Akhil Gogoi many times has expressed the organisation's idea of social transformation that is needed in the society. "We abhor irresponsible, anarchist, gun-centric politics. We aim to establish a non-violent, humane society", Gogoi said.<sup>45</sup> Gogoi further added that 'in the process of achieving it, there might be application of violence depending on the nature of the enemy. But it can only be in the form as advocated by *Jyotiprasad Agarwalla*. According to him, all struggles strive for non-violence. But the struggle would change its face according to the nature of the adversary. If the enemy is Mahisasur, the struggle would take the form of Durga. But even then the ideal remains Krishna, who was non-violent. According to the contingency we need to be KrishnaArjun. But we have to retain the non-violence essence of our tradition even then.'<sup>46</sup> Gogoi has condemned the shortcut tactics adopted by the Maoists in India. Gogoi says, "Maoism gives less emphasis on people's movements, whereas the main point of our struggle is a mass movement. Our aim is to establish a non-violent and humane society."<sup>47</sup> Many times, the course of struggle of KMSS has turned violent at times. On February 24, 2014 KMSS launched a long protest rally in front of the Assam Secretariat, Dispur; demanding land rights for local people of Assam and implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Pranab Boro, one of the activists of the protest movement self-immolated in the midst of the protest as an act of defiance against the government.<sup>48</sup> The Tarun Gogoi led Congress

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<sup>44</sup> Though, in 2015 KMSS has come out with its own political party, the Gana Mukti Sangram Asom.

<sup>45</sup> Das, D. (2010, April 18). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Assam: A brief note and an interview with Akhil Gogoi*. Sanhati. Accessed <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/> on 23.02.2018.

<sup>46</sup> Das, D. (2010, April 18). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Assam: A brief note and an interview with Akhil Gogoi*. Sanhati. Accessed <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/> on 23.02.2018.

<sup>47</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 72.

<sup>48</sup> India Times, (2014, February 26). *Shocking Pics: Pranab Boro immolates self*. Indiatimes. Accessed from <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/more-from-india/shocking-photos-guwahati-man-pranab-boro-immolates->

government after the incident had filed cases against KMSS's leader, Akhil Gogoi and five other members of the organisation for instigating Pranab Boro for self-immolation.<sup>49</sup>

The nature of the struggle of KMSS has not only been limited to lawful and legitimate pattern, seeking or demanding justice in a civil disobedient way, but at times the way of protesting has become violent and provocative in nature. The forms of protests, however, at all times and places, cannot be said to be peaceful and democratic but an altogether different form depending on the nature of the state and pertinent issues concerning the masses at large. Coming in violent terms with the state apparatus, the struggle of the organisation has acquired a new dimension to people's protest. While still claiming to be an ardent socialist in Marxist philosophy, the organisation discards the short-cut revolutionary tactics adopted by the Maoists of the country which only involves capturing power. "We do not seek to be guided by the Maoist tradition" Gogoi said.<sup>50</sup> The political method of KMSS is a reformist one. Being labeled as Maoists by the Indian state, it clarifies its stand, condemning the short route that has been adopted by the Indian Maoists to achieve their objectives. Speaking about Maoists Akhil Gogoi said, "Maoism puts less emphasis on people's movement whereas mass movement is the fulcrum of our tactic. Without political assertion, political development and mental transformation through mass movement even if power is captured through armed actions it would not lead to true emancipation of people. We abhor irresponsible, anarchist, gun-centric politics. We aim to establish a non-violent, humane society."<sup>51</sup> The Marxist ideology that KMSS<sup>52</sup> states is one that is based on mutual understanding borrowed heavily from people's ideology. Its resistance and pursuit of social transformation is based on its idea and belief in non-violent constitutional methods which are more enduring and have a future

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[self-130763.html#3](#) on 16.10.2018. KMSS, every year on 24<sup>th</sup> February commemorates the death of Pranab Boro as 'Assam's National Martyr Day'.

<sup>49</sup> TNN, (2014, March 5). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti agitation to continue until withdrawal of cases*. Times of India. Accessed from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/Krishak-Mukti-Sangram-Samiti-agitation-to-continue-until-withdrawal-of-cases/articleshow/31458300.cms> on 16.10.2018.

<sup>50</sup> Das, D. (2010, April 18). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Assam: A brief note and an interview with Akhil Gogoi*. Sanhati. Accessed <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/> on 23.02.2018.

<sup>51</sup> Das, D. (2010, April 18). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Assam: A brief note and an interview with Akhil Gogoi*. Sanhati. Accessed <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/> on 23.02.2018.

<sup>52</sup> The ideology of KMSS will be elaborated in the following chapter.

in the political and the public sphere. This has been largely due to the continuous attacks by the state at large.

### **3.3 The State and KMSS**

The discussion above raises some important questions- How does the nature of protests determine the state approach towards the organisation? How the state responds to the demands put by KMSS?

KMSS, many a times has confronted the state, though the nature of it has been different. Sometime it is in the form of a dialogue or a discussion or sometime it becomes a brutal duality between the two. The methods adopted by KMSS to meet its immediate needs like road blockades, gheraos, bandhs has led to the police and the military machinery of the state use force to disperse the crowd and restore normalcy and law and order. In one of the mass protests for the land rights of the local/indigenous people on June 22, 2011, KMSS along with the landless protestors started on a peaceful rally at Dispur wanting to submit a memorandum for land rights to the district administration and government representative. The administration refused to meet the landless protestors even after 5 hours of waiting outside. The crowd along with KMSS started marching forward towards the Guwahati-Shillong road, on the busy streets of Guwahati. The police opened teargas shells, water cannons, *lathicharge* and firing on the unarmed protestors, as a result of which three (3) protestors died and 28 others injured. The state administration immediately declared that KMSS has defied law and order of the state. The next day KMSS came out with a press release alleging that the public did not break the law but was done by the government and also went on to blame the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) and the Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) for the violence and the brutal crackdown.<sup>53</sup> KMSS in a memorandum on the same has not only illustrated the sequence of events at the protest site but has also pointedly attempted to show that KMSS has always abided by the rules and laws of the democratic country. The following are the points raised by the organisation in its memorandum submitted to the S.K Kar committee, a one member committee appointed by the government of Assam to probe into the matter.

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<sup>53</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 82.

1. The protest on 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 2011 was conducted in a democratic manner with due prior approval of the respective departments of the state.
2. The protest was not unlawful and rather peaceful before the police employed tear gas shells, opened firing and lathicharge.
3. There was no prior notice or warning by the police before they broke down upon the protestors and used tear gas shells, firing and lathicharge.
4. There was no incitement of violence on the part of the protestors before the police broke down on them through lathicharge and tear gas shells.
5. If there was any need to open fire on the protesting crowd, then the police must always aim at firing at one's leg. On 22<sup>nd</sup> June, the police fired aiming at the chest and head of the protestors as a result of which three of our protestors died. The act of the police was completely against the law.
6. There must have been immediate hospital arrangement for the injured protestors by the administration where there wasn't any.
7. There was no provision of barricades, medical arrangement despite the police knowing that there are thousands of protestors on the site.<sup>54</sup>

The memorandum by KMSS was addressed from the legal point of view, and made it a strongpoint to counter the allegations by the state police department. In 2017, police *lathicharged* the angry agitators who were protesting against eviction at Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary demanding land rights in which around fifty (50) members of KMSS were injured. The Superintendent of Police (SP) said in a clarification, "The protestors were violating the law and order situation and did not have any permission for the procession in the town. It is a law and order situation".<sup>55</sup> In another instance of lathicharge by the police, the SP said, "We cannot allow them to hold a demonstration for 15,000 people at Dispur. It is a very busy area with the secretariat complex with schools, colleges and hospitals." To the same, an agitator expressed, "We came for a democratic *satyagraha* demanding land rights for the indigenous people living for many decades but we were denied permission to hold this demonstration

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<sup>54</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti. March 2010-March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 250-251.

<sup>55</sup> PTI. (2017, August 28). *Police lathicharged KMSS members, 50 injured*. Outlook. Retrieved from <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/police-lathicharge-kmss-members-injure-50/1133929> on 7.10.2019.

and our voice is being brutally suppressed.”<sup>56</sup> In one of the major crackdown by the police on the protestors, three protestors including a child died leaving forty three (43) injured of which twenty (20) were policemen.<sup>57</sup> The rally turned violent in no time and many policemen were beaten up and several vehicles were burnt or damaged by the supporters of KMSS.<sup>58</sup> In 2010, KMSS expressed dissatisfaction over not taking strict action against the District Commissioner because of police torture on a protesting crowd in Dhemaji.<sup>59</sup> In many instances, its protestors were detained by the police. There have been organised strikes at many places which were defeated by the capitalist state by arresting the strikers and imprisoning the leaders thus weakening the movement and the organisation.

While the state used its force to subdue the rising protests of KMSS, it also adopted other means to do the same. Because of the rampant criticism it has faced from the peasant organisation, the state has not always been in a cordial relation with KMSS. A number of criminal cases have already been registered against its members and activists. The Amnesty International records that around 100 cases so far has been registered against Akhil Gogoi, the prime leader and General Secretary of KMSS.<sup>60</sup> The Congress-led government of Assam during 2001-2016, many a times has labeled KMSS as a Maoist organisation, having links with the Maoist militants of the state. In 2010, in a secret report of the Assam Police, Akhil Gogoi has been named as a ‘Maoist’.<sup>61</sup> The report said that Akhil Gogoi, including many other members of KMSS trained under Maoists in 2007.<sup>62</sup> Later in an interview with NDTV, Akhil Gogoi clarified, “I am a Marxist and I do believe in social transformation. But I am not

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<sup>56</sup> Zeenews, (2013, October 1). *Police lathicharge KMSS protestors in Assam*. Retrieved from [https://zeenews.india.com/news/assam/police-lathicharge-kmss-protesters-in-assam\\_880469.html](https://zeenews.india.com/news/assam/police-lathicharge-kmss-protesters-in-assam_880469.html) on 3.9.2018.

<sup>57</sup> NDTV Correspondent. (2011, June 22). *Three die in Guwahati violence*. Retrieved from <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/three-die-in-guwahati-violence-459233> on 9.12.2017. Also Misra, U. (2011). A New Edge to People’s Protest in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (28), 16-18.

<sup>58</sup> Three government luxury buses were burnt in the midst of the protests, the state blaming the supporters of KMSS for the rampage and vice versa. See Misra, U. (2011). A New Edge to People’s Protest in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (28), 16-18.

<sup>59</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p.11.

<sup>60</sup> Accessed <https://amnesty.org.in/krishak-mukti-sangram-samiti-peasant-rights-activists-are-being-harassed-and-intimidated/> on 31.12.2019.

<sup>61</sup> Independent MLA Bhuban Pegu, development activist Ravindra Nath and Akhil Gogoi were named as Maoists, in the secret report.

<sup>62</sup> Express News Service, (2010. March 15). *Anti-corruption activist a ‘Maoist’ in Assam report*. The Indian Express. Accessed <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/anticorruptionactivistmaoistinassamreport/590798/0> on 31.12.2019.

a Maoist. They don't believe in mass activities. We at KMSS are organizing the masses for radical change.”<sup>63</sup> In 2014, Tarun Gogoi, the then Chief Minister of Assam said in a press conference, “I suspect KMSS has link with the Maoist.”<sup>64</sup> In a major violent tussle between KMSS and the police, the state imposed 17 cases on its supreme leader Akhil Gogoi.<sup>65</sup>

Time and again the state has claimed that KMSS has strong links with the Maoists and its leaders have been arrested on several occasions by the state on grounds of breaking law and order. In 2014, the leaders of KMSS were arrested and slapped with charges of instigating the public when one of its protestors, Pranab Boro self immolated himself in front of the Assam state secretariat at Dispur in one of massive land rights dharna led by KMSS. In 2016 after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed the government in Assam, its leader Akhil Gogoi was arrested by the Assam Police on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2017, first on grounds of sedition, for instigating the public to take up arms against the Government at a public rally at Moran, Dibrugarh and later rearrested under NSA<sup>66</sup> on September 25. Although Gogoi has been arrested 14 times before, it was in 2017 that he was detained under NSA.<sup>67</sup> Gogoi was addressing a public rally at Moran on the proposed CAB of 2016, during which Gogoi was arrested. Gogoi was booked on grounds of sedition, criminal conspiracy, waging or attempting to wage war against the Government of India, creating communal disharmony and hate speech.<sup>68</sup> After a writ petition filed by Akhil Gogoi at the Gauhati High Court, Gogoi was released on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, 2017 on the court's order, saying that his detention violated article 22 (5) of the Indian constitution. On December 12, 2019, Gogoi was again

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<sup>63</sup> Accessed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAni3rMWF9I> on 31.12.2019.

<sup>64</sup> Tarun Gogoi also pointed that he do not have any strong evidence on the matter, although he thinks that it is connected with the Maoists. PTI, (2014, February 05). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti has link with Maoists: Tarun Gogoi*. Economic Times. Accessed <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/krishak-mukti-sangram-samiti-has-link-with-maoists-tarun-gogoi/articleshow/29905880.cms?from=mdr> on 31.12.2019.

<sup>65</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Press Reports and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 93.

<sup>66</sup> The National Security Act (NSA) is an act of the Indian Parliament of 1980. It is an act to provide for preventive detention in certain cases, concerning the security of India, which extends to the whole of India.

<sup>67</sup> Dutta, A. R. (2018). Preventive Detention under Judicial Scrutiny. *Akhil Gogoi v the State of Assam. Economic and Political Weekly, LIII* (12), 20-23.

<sup>68</sup> Dutta, A. R. (2018). Preventive Detention under Judicial Scrutiny. *Akhil Gogoi v the State of Assam. Economic and Political Weekly, LIII* (12), 20-23.

arrested by the Assam Police, when he was mobilizing people against the CAA which was later handed over to the National Investigation Agency (NIA).<sup>69</sup>

Akhil Gogoi before his arrest had led and mobilised the public against the CAB and the CAA in Assam. The Sarbananda Sonowal government activated a case registered against Gogoi of 2009 where it was alleged that he has links with Maoists organisations and militants. Gogoi was charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and other sections of the Indian Penal Code, which includes section 120 B (criminal conspiracy); 124 A (sedition); 153 A (unlawful association) and 153 B (imputations, assertions prejudicial to national integration). Along with Akhil Gogoi, other members of KMSS including Dhaijya Konwar (General Secretary, KMSS), Bitu Sonowal (President, SMSS), Manash Konwar (Vice-President, SMSS) and Lakshyajyoti Gogoi (Vice-President (SMSS) were also arrested. The NIA arrested Gogoi under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.<sup>70</sup> The UAPA involves primarily in prevention of unlawful activities of individuals and associations and also for dealing with terrorist activities. The act defines unlawful activity as any action taken by an individual or an association by committing an act or by words, which is i) intended to bring the cession of a part of the territory of India or the succession of a part of the territory of India from the Union, or which incites any individual or a group of individual to do so; ii) which disclaims, questions and disrupts the integrity and sovereignty of India and iii) which causes or intended to cause disaffection against India. The act further elaborates on 'unlawful association' as one i) which engages in unlawful activity or encourages or aids persons to undertake any unlawful activity and ii) which engages in any activity under section 153A or 153B of the Indian Penal Code. The act which reserves the right to declare any individual or

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<sup>69</sup> The National Investigation Agency (NIA) was established by the Indian government in 2009 to combat terror and related crimes with assurance from the states of the Indian union. It is the central agency to probe into the terror attacks of the country and has maintained a list of the banned organisations of the country. The NIA came into existence after the National Investigation Agency Act was passed by the Indian Parliament in 2008. At present the NIA is functioning as the Central Counter Terrorism Law Enforcement Agency in the country. Till February 2020, the NIA has registered and investigated a total of 315 cases. The NIA has its headquarters in New Delhi and its branch offices in Hyderabad, Guwahati, Kochi, Lucknow, Mumbai, Kolkata, Raipur and Jammu.

<sup>70</sup> The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967 aims at effective prevention of unlawful activities in India which threatens the security and integrity of the country. The said act has seven (7) chapters and three (3) schedules, the chapters ranging from defining unlawful associations, offences and penalties for being a member of such unlawful associations, punishment for terrorist activities, forfeiture of proceeds of terrorism or any property used for terrorism, terrorist organisations etc. *The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967* (Act no 37 of 1967), India, dated 30<sup>th</sup> December, 1967



association as ‘unlawful’ or ‘terrorist’ by the Central government, has labeled KMSS the same. The NIA investigating the case under the UAPA has viewed it as a potential organisation intended to create terror and its protests against the CAB and CAA as unlawful which can be threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. It also viewed the organisation as ‘waging war against the state’<sup>71</sup> intended to cause disaffection against India. Furthermore, it may be added that the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act of 2019 has further enhanced the power of the Central government to declare not only organisations but also ‘individuals’ as terrorists. It also gave much greater powers to the National Investigation Agency (NIA) to take control of the cases which otherwise would fall under the domain of the police department of the states.<sup>72</sup> This amendment again comes after the re-elected BJP comes to power in 2019.

The handling over the case by the Assam police to the NIA, perceiving KMSS as a possible threat gives the relation between the state and the peasant organisation though the NIA could not file a charge sheet even after 41 days of the imprisonment of its members. Both the times, Gogoi was arrested as a preventive measure, for his acts were considered as unlawful, dangerous which involved treachery to the Indian state. The State of Assam alleged that the persons “convinced, engaged and promoted the engagement of persons to become members of ‘unlawful’ assembly at various places in Assam and a conspiracy secretly hatched to assault and voluntarily cause grievous hurt to public servants by deadly weapons and inflammable substances likely to cause death.”<sup>73</sup> The state of Assam perceived rail road blockades as ‘criminal activities’ and that the ‘public was motivated to launch massive protests, provoked to cause riots’ which has created enmity between different communities of Assam across religion, residence, race etc which is ‘prejudicial to maintenance of harmony thus threatening the security and the sovereignty of the state and waging a war against it.’<sup>74</sup> The instance of waging war against the state through protests and mobilizing the public has

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<sup>71</sup> *Akhil Gogoi v The State of Assam (2020)*: Bail Application No 834/2020, Gauhati High Court Judgement dated 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2020

<sup>72</sup> *The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act, 2019* (No 28 Of 2019), India, dated 8<sup>th</sup> August 2019.

<sup>73</sup> *Akhil Gogoi v The State of Assam (2020)*: Bail Application No 834/2020, Gauhati High Court Judgement dated 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2020

<sup>74</sup> *Akhil Gogoi v The State of Assam (2020)*: Bail Application No 834/2020, Gauhati High Court Judgement dated 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2020

been described as unlawful and criminalized the due process. The manner of detention of Gogoi, two times after the BJP formed the government in Assam, is representing the excess powers of the state and the civil authorities to maintain order and security. The state many a times labeled the organisation as a law breaker, arrested its leaders and members, picked up its leaders from protest sites as a preventive measure.

UAPA has been an overriding law of the state which attempts to supersede the due process of law. Its mere assumption of a potential threat is vehemently used by the state to prevent the unwanted opposition it faces from the forces of resistance. The incarceration of Akhil Gogoi, depicting him as a possible threat, with the application of preventive detention in both the cases, was an attempt by the 'executive machinery of the state'. This particular segment of the Indian state has used force and legal ways to combat KMSS and its members. Cases of sedition were charged on the leaders of the peasant organisation for intending to incite riots which was considered to be harmful for national integration. Anushka Singh while exploring the law of sedition in India argues that sedition is largely imposed for criminalizing political resistance by the state and that sedition law is used to delegitimize the rising movements.<sup>75</sup> Sedition law in liberal democracies, Singh argues, is used by 'those in power to perpetuate themselves by suppressing political opposition by presenting them as concerns of national and public security'.<sup>76</sup> In India, Singh argues that the law of sedition is used along with counter terrorism legislations.<sup>77</sup> However the organisation has always relied on other institutions of the country, such as the judiciary, civil society organisations etc. KMSS has been an ardent criticizer of the executive machinery of the state, its policies, approaches and developmental frameworks that works against the interests of the general public and the peasants.

'Law' has become an agency for both the state and KMSS. Many times, KMSS have demanded adequate punishment for the guilty, CBI enquiry into alleged corruption cases thereby sanctifying the institutional set up of the country. The capitalist state has employed legal mechanism to label KMSS as an unlawful organisation and its activities as a potential

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<sup>75</sup> Singh, A. (2018). *Sedition in Liberal Democracies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 362.

<sup>76</sup> Singh, A. (2018). *Sedition in Liberal Democracies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 368.

<sup>77</sup> Singh, A. (2018). *Sedition in Liberal Democracies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 366.

threat to the nation. Ujjwal Kumar Singh while exploring the ‘extraordinary laws’<sup>78</sup> in India like the TADA and POTA argues that these laws works towards the ‘preservation of particular regimes and the hegemonic structures of the nation-state’ which gives ‘extraordinary powers to the political decision makers’ and the extraordinary laws becomes a terrain where the political contests occur.<sup>79</sup> While not refuting the claim to these laws, it seems apparent that the state now practices legal procedures to combat its adversary. Ujjwal Kumar Singh further states that these laws are not only preventive but also punitive in nature.<sup>80</sup> Sometime it is not the repressive apparatus of the state such as the police, the military, bureaucracy and the like which is attempting to subdue the rising protest movements but also the legal mechanism thus adopted. In an interview with the Scroll, after his arrest for involvement in the anti-CAA protests Akhil Gogoi said, “The protests that I took part were outside the District Commissioner’s office and I ensured that people stay non-violent but protest and protest hard”.<sup>81</sup> While Gogoi many a times asserted that he never had any links with the Maoists, his method of protesting has always been targeted. The very idea of protesting which can take the shape of the prolonged movement is when the state uses the laws to invalidate the protest as ‘illegal’ as well as prohibit the further spread of such movements. Anushka Singh criticizes the very aspects of a liberal democracy that curtails the very right to the freedom of speech and dissent which remains precarious.<sup>82</sup> Hence, a state, defined by the principle of democracy, market and capital which is more governed with an intention to curtail the protests adopts legal way to achieve its purpose. This is a defining feature of a neo-liberal centralized capitalist state which is built on the foundations of democracy.

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<sup>78</sup> Ujjwal Kumar Singh lists out three important reasons as to why anti-terror laws like TADA and POTA are called extraordinary. Firstly because these laws responds to issues of extraordinary nature, secondly because these laws are temporary and their lives are coterminous with the extraordinary events and thirdly because these laws are constitutive of provisions like arrest, detention, investigation evidence, trial and punishment. See Singh, U. K. (2007). *The State, Democracy and Anti-Terror Laws in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 28-29.

<sup>79</sup> Singh argues that these extraordinary laws are surrounded by the legal procedures, political contexts and discursive practices which gives due effect to the laws. Singh, U. K. (2007). *The State, Democracy and Anti-Terror Laws in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 17-18.

<sup>80</sup> Singh, U. K. (2007). *The State, Democracy and Anti-Terror Laws in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 102.

<sup>81</sup> Saikia, A. (2019, December 18). *Akhil Gogoi Interview: “I have never been with Maoists, and never will be”*. Scroll.in. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/947134/akhil-gogoi-interview-i-have-never-been-with-maoists-and-never-will-be-on-25.10.2020>.

<sup>82</sup> Singh, A. (2018). *Sedition in Liberal Democracies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 368.

### **3.4 Summing up the political methods and the relation between the State and KMSS**

Generally in an era, driven by market logic, the right to assert and resist finds its due place in the liberal framework. The coercive apparatus of the state- the ‘political society’, in Gramscian terminology, is employed by the state to dominate the rising voices of dissent and protests. This is particularly true in the post-colonial societies, where the state still assumes an important role in driving all the economic, political operations of the nation. It has been seen in the last chapter, the way state assumes the prime role in driving the market forces, which the KMSS has been opposing and organizing its protests at. The state has always faced large criticism from KMSS since its inception. Eventually, this has resulted in an intolerable relation between the two, the state projecting the peasant organisation as a violent, unlawful, illegal and terrorist organisation adopting illegal means. The instances of the state and KMSS have come to give a different picture of both the political society and the civil society of Antonio Gramsci. While the political society has been at a combat with KMSS (and vice versa), it is the civil society, like the media, newspapers, educational institutions that the peasant organisation has often relied on to continue its resistance against the political society. The civil society is very much relied upon by KMSS. The political society consists of another crucial segment which is the Judiciary. Though a part of the ‘political society’, it is the judiciary that KMSS relies on because of its independence from other organs of the state.<sup>83</sup>

KMSS has attempted to act within the legal boundary as far as its resistance can be comprehended. As a pressure group KMSS resorted to ‘unlawful’ means to meet their demands under situations of crisis. This has sometimes resulted in a direct confrontation between the state and the peasant organisation on matters of law, order, security and integrity. Furthermore in the tussle between the state and KMSS, the state has assumed a prime important role in handling the law and order situation, as the military, para-military, security and the police forces is the institution of the state which is mainly concerned with the ‘management of violence’.<sup>84</sup> An interesting phenomenon of the political methods adhered by KMSS is its due observance of the ‘rule of law’. The rule of law was the ultimate

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<sup>83</sup> The independence of the judiciary has been mentioned in the Indian constitution under Part V which deals with the Union judiciary (article 124-147) and Part which deals with the provisions of High courts.

<sup>84</sup> See Miliband, R. (1970). *The State in Capitalist society*. London: The Gamelot Press Ltd, pp. 49-67.

guarantor of its sustainability in a constitutional state. By its acceptability and endurance, it legitimizes not only its sustainability but also the constitutional and legal authority of the state because it is not KMSS, but the state who is the upholder and regulator of ‘rule of law’. So any violation of the rule of law has entitled the state with a legal authority to take legal action. Andre Beteille notes that if the state plays the guarantor of the rule of law, it must have its own structure of authority and some sort of separation of powers is essential to restrict the expansionist tendencies of a modern state.<sup>85</sup> The ongoing tussle and the relationship between the state and the KMSS can be understood from the fact that the way the state imposes its autocratic rules on the peasant organisation through its many institutions.

However the incarceration of Akhil Gogoi and other members of KMSS by the state on cases of UAPA under NIA have led to a different yet similar orientation of the people. On my field to Doyang and Tengani, almost all the people believe that Akhil Gogoi has been imprisoned because he was mobilising people against the CAA and was opposing it. The yearlong incarceration of Akhil Gogoi made them affirmative to their popular belief of the insecurity of the government. ‘*Bhoi khaise sorkar*’ (the government is afraid) was the only response. In Doyang and Tengani people had more hatred towards the BJP government though there has not been eviction during their regime. Hemendra Baruah while narrating the struggle and plight of the people of Tengani and admitting that though there has been no eviction by the BJP government was repeatedly referring to the BJP as a fascist government. When asked on the reason for the particular reference, Baruah narrated the way Akhil Gogoi has been incarcerated without any solid evidence. Baruah said,

*“all the governments are equally bad, the Congress, AGP and the BJP. We were rendered homeless during the AGP and the Congress rule. But the BJP is fascist. Look what they did to that boy-Akhil”*<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Beteille discusses at length the structure of the civil society and analyzes three well defined framework through which civil society is to be examined viz. 1) state; 2) citizenship; 3) mediating institutions. It is on Beteille’s discussion of the civil society with the state, that he discusses the important point. See Beteille, A. (2014). *Civil Society and its Institutions*. In C. M. Elliott, *Civil Society and Democracy* (pp. 191-210). New Delhi : Oxford University Press.

<sup>86</sup> Hemendra Baruah, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

This assertion by Hemendra Baruah gives an important point of analysis- though BJP has not carried out eviction drives in Doyang and Tengani unlike the Congress and the AGP, it is still conceived as a party which is undemocratic and autocratic. This has emerged because of the arrest of their leader Akhil Gogoi under UAPA. The people of Doyang and Tengani were unaware of the details of UAPA and the laws under which Akhil Gogoi was detained, though they have heard of them but their interpretation and conclusion was drawn on the context in which Gogoi was arrested, during his active involvement in anti-CAA movement. The people knew that Gogoi was labeled as a ‘terrorist’ by the government. *Akhil Gogoi never killed people, they did-* was the popular response. In saying so they even put the question to me to analyze and answer whether the government is creating terror or Akhil Gogoi. This confidence among the people on their leader and on their opinions was based on their personal experience. Lurin Jyoti Gogoi, popular AASU activist of Assam and now the president of the political party of AASU- Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP), in an interview with *The Wire* said that Akhil Gogoi was arrested because the government wanted to scare them and derail the anti-CAA protests in Assam.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the laws by which the state aims to prevent unwanted terror may not be taken in the same way but are actually seen as a deliberate attempt to curb rising voices of dissent. That the laws are punitive in nature, as Ujjwal Kumar Singh argues; are also viewed in the same way by the public.

KMSS has been filing complaints and taking legal mechanisms to take on its adversaries. At times it has adopted methods that disrupt the normal and smooth functioning of the public affairs of the state. The one-sided democratic means is not sufficient for a mass organisation to meet its agendas. The radicalism comes in respond to emergency situations and the repressive apparatus of the state, which in this case are the police, CRPF, the army which ensures domination directly. The institutionalization and adherence to the rule of law secures its place in the society. In a capitalist state which is governed by democracy, the authorities attempts to suppress the agitator and protests by law, made by them. This

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<sup>87</sup> Pisharoty, S. B. (2020, January 23). *Akhil Gogoi was arrested to scare us, says AASU's General Secretary*. The Wire. Retrieved from [https://thewire.in/politics/aasu-lurinjyoti-gogoi-cao-protest-political-alternative\\_on\\_5.03.2020](https://thewire.in/politics/aasu-lurinjyoti-gogoi-cao-protest-political-alternative_on_5.03.2020).

particular trend of peasant politics have faced wrath of the state, resulting in the weakening of the organisation to the core.

Overall the chapter discussed the nature of KMSS's struggle, its course throughout, and the way it has been trying to legitimize the same. This attempt of securing legitimacy of its method of protest by employing the democratic methods has strengthened the legal authority of the state as well. The role of KMSS as a pressure group gives the nature of its political resentment, over the years. This however can never guarantee to build good relations with the state, the reason not being its hostility to the state, but the actual structures on which a modern and a neo-liberal state is based. These structures mainly arise from embedded notions of legitimacy. Most of the protests were silent observances yet a strong public display of dissent and disapproval. The modus operandi has largely adhered to legal means; its radicalism has been only evident in situations of crisis. Maoism, though a variant of Marxism is perceived as illegitimate which is inconsistent with the state authority.

Understanding the tussle between the state and KMSS can be understood from Ralph Miliband who argued that, "The more the state seeks to repress, the greater is the opposition it is likely to engender; and the more opposition it engenders, the greater are the powers which it must invoke. It is along that road that lies the transition from 'bourgeois democracy' to conservative authoritarianism".<sup>88</sup> Infact understanding the nature of KMSS's dissent, Sanjay Barbora notes that "it represents a pared-down, manageable voice of dissent in Assam and if the government fails to engage with them and continues to detain its members under dubious charges, they will be left with a violent political abyss in due time".<sup>89</sup> The coming down of the state heavily on KMSS is not dubious, but it brings the nature of functioning of the capitalist state as well. Because the state assumes an important place in a capitalist society and the capitalist state is that arena where KMSS has been struggling against.

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<sup>88</sup> See Miliband, R. (1970). *The State in Capitalist Society*. London: The Gamelot Press Ltd, p. 272.

<sup>89</sup> Barbora was referring to an incident of violent confrontation between the police and the peasant organisation. See Barbora, S. (2011). Assam's New Voice of Dissent. *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVI (28), 19-22.





## **Chapter Four**

### **The National Question of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti- Trends of Peasant Politics II**

Till now, the development of KMSS as a peasant/workers organisation has been observed through patterns of its growth and ability to address the prime issues of the peasants. The previous chapter depicted a specific pattern of peasant mobilisation which KMSS adopted in its struggle. It has been discussed in the last chapter as to how the state through its agencies and institutions manages to curb the rising voices of dissent and the peasant struggle. The political methods of KMSS as has been witnessed at large do resonate to maintaining the institutional and democratic norms of the country. But the state being the upholder of the ‘rule of law’ and ‘defender of its authority’ overrides the legal framework of KMSS. This mainly arises because of the legal guarantee of its many agencies.

The discussions in the previous chapters traced the trajectory of the development of KMSS into a full-fledged peasant and workers organisation in Assam. The operation of the organisation is delegated to areas, crucial to peasant’s life and development. The geographical limit of KMSS, has determined its emergence as a ‘regional organisation’ of Assam, with its thrust more on the regional issues and development. But this idea of national consciousness for Assam entails some different comprehension in terms of the specific acts and operations of KMSS, which follows its own distinct idea of nationalism. KMSS over the years has emerged as an organisation which caters not only to peasant issues but also larger issues which concern the region as a whole. Assam, being an agrarian economy, with a major workforce tied to agricultural and allied activities, KMSS has dwelt into issues pivotal to the region, which concerns the ‘Assamese peasant’ too. Taking into note its engagement on the region’s issues, the chapter illustrates how KMSS has been primarily regional, and adhered to the aspirations of the larger Assamese community in its varied manifestations. Lenin said, “As the majority of the population is farmers and workers their problems are true national problems.” Akhil Gogoi also remarked, “Our prime aim is to turn the peasant movement into

a national movement”.<sup>1</sup> The theory of nationalism, as practiced and propagated by KMSS is central to understanding the organisation’s agenda, goal, belief, ideology and the nature of the organisation. Therefore in the present chapter an attempt will be made to further understand another trend of peasant mobilisation by KMSS. KMSS’s specific engagement on the national issues of Assam pertains us to ponder on another specific aspect of nature of KMSS- the issues of Assam it has engaged with. Taking the above discussion into due consideration, the chapter proceeds in understanding the prime question

*How KMSS has emerged itself as a significant organisation in Assam partly by a distinctive articulation of the Assamese and Assam over the years?*

In exploring the specific subject of nationalism, the chapter does not seek to answer as to why and how the agrarian and peasant question became a nationalist question for KMSS. This has already been circuitously answered in the earlier chapters. It tries to understand the nature of this nationalism that KMSS often engages in. It tries to take a different understanding of Assamese nationalism, taking into cognizance the nature of its emergence and the manner it has been championed.

At the beginning a clarification on the usage of the terms ‘national’ and ‘regional’ is necessary. Scholars while writing on nationalism of Assam have preferred to strictly not use the term national and have instead used other terms, distancing and differentiating themselves from the larger notions of nationalism, like Sanjib Baruah has used the term- ‘sub-national’ to refer to the rising national consciousness of Assam.<sup>2</sup> Politics in the regions or the states of the Indian union were broadly referred as regionalism. In this chapter I have preferably used the terms ‘national’ and ‘regional’ depending on certain contexts. The terms ‘national’ and ‘regional’ in the chapter are not meant to indicate different meanings. But however at many different instances the two terms overlap each other because of specific usages, which may puzzle the reader. Hence I draw a thin line of differentiation between the two-

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<sup>1</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Baruah, S. (2001). *India Against Itself*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

The term 'national' in the chapter is meant to understand the larger sentiment and emotion involved in making of the Assamese nationalism as a whole. National here means the larger sentiment or feeling attached to make a distinct identity. Nationalism is thus used in a broader sense of the larger Assamese sentiment. On the other hand 'regional' here is referred to the distinct elements that make up for the larger Assamese sentiment like language, culture, folklore etc. Regional also is used to focus on the nationalism of Assam when compared to or as distinct from the larger Indian nationalism. Simply put, nationalism is used to signify the Assamese sentiment while regionalism is used for particular aspects that build up the larger Assamese sentiment and also when it is used in comparison to the larger Indian nationalism.

To understand the various ideas of KMSS's nationalism the chapter proceeds with six different sections. The first section is a general discussion of the vivid nature of nationalism as championed by the KMSS to give an understanding the nature of its nationalism. The second section then proceeds to discuss the ideological orientation of the peasant organisation which can be seen rooted in the Assam's art, culture and literature. The third section discusses the cultural issues that KMSS has taken up in its struggle against the forces of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. The following two sections discuss the economic ideas and efforts of KMSS in making Assam an economically self-reliant region and the larger political/power arrangement it envisages for Assam. Finally it discusses KMSS's efforts for the citizens of Assam within the much debated citizenship question. The discussion illustrates the areas where KMSS has been banking its nationalist project and depicts as to how KMSS emerged as a distinct regional organisation of Assam by distinctive articulation of Assam and the Assamese over the years.

#### **4.1 Regional assertions of KMSS**

KMSS has specific objectives and its struggle is confined to Assam. As specified in its constitution, KMSS's work is confined to two issues of Assam- its people and its land.<sup>3</sup> Assamese national consciousness has been vital for KMSS, for often the organisation has dwelt importantly on the region as the nucleus of its struggle. The peasant organisation has

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<sup>3</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti

largely evolved over the years as a specific regional organisation largely confined to the geographical boundaries of Assam and engaged in the region's political, cultural, social, economic issues which were also in consonant with the region's sentiment and tradition. The constitution of KMSS says, "*The crisis of Assam is the peasant's crisis. The peasant's crisis is the crisis of the land and resources. So the peasant movement means to launch the land rights movement. Our primary aim is to fight for the land rights of the peasants.*"<sup>4</sup> The constitution attempts to establish KMSS's objectives as Assam's larger issues and on several instances, it stressed itself as a regional/national organisation of Assam. It says, "*Though it is an organisation for the poor and downtrodden peasants, it has national/regional sentiments.*"<sup>5</sup> In a question on whether the organisation has been able to give a nationalist image to the movement of KMSS, Akhil Gogoi stated, "the nationalist movement in Assam has been primarily of the bourgeoisie and the middle class people. We are taking the poor along with it."<sup>6</sup> The association of a peasant's life and rights as Assam's national and larger issue gives a different understanding of the nature of regional discourse that KMSS has been involved. KMSS has been observing days which it considers significant and vital in terms of its ethics, philosophy and ideology of the organisation. Annually it observes seven days which are 1) *Xilpi Divas* (Artists Day), 17<sup>th</sup> January on the memory of Roopkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwalla; 2) *Krishak Swahid Divas* (Peasants Martyr day), 28<sup>th</sup> January; 3) *International Women's Day*, 8<sup>th</sup> March 4) *Momai Tamuly Borborua Kormoxanskriti Pokhek*, (Momai Tamuly Borborua work-culture fortnight celebration) 15<sup>th</sup> March-1<sup>st</sup> April 5) *May Day*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 6) *Bishnu Rabha Divas*, 20<sup>th</sup> June 7) *Foundation Day*, 20<sup>th</sup> July. The Peasant's Martyr Day is annually observed to mark the death of the protesting peasants of Patharughat who died after police firing on January 28, 1894. These days have become as a kind of symbolic exercise with an outlook that encompasses the peasantry, workers and women's significance in their greater struggle. The larger cultural and symbolic idea of observing these days attracts not only popular imagination but also creates a new way of asserting its ideology, aims and principles. These days are significant for KMSS's ideology and principles and also its support base. The organisation extends its support base by observing days like International Women's Day and International Worker's Day.

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<sup>4</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Aakhar Prakash, p. 79.

KMSS many times has aimed to work for the native and indigenous peasants of Assam. To protect its land from ‘foreign companies’; emphasizing on the need to use local seeds, local technology, local fertilizer instead of hybrid and chemical fertilizer; land rights to the native and indigenous people of Assam to prohibiting sale of indigenous people’s land to outsiders, the organisation takes the people of Assam in its indigeneity and culture. Among many of its agendas, KMSS aims to replace colonial land laws with a people centric, region-based and progressive land law. Land reform for KMSS largely involves bringing the land from the corporate companies to the local, native and indigenous people of Assam. It aims to build Assam to a self-reliant organic region, taking the people and the region exclusively. Its struggle against the foreigner’ issue, detection of the same and the implementation of the National Register of Citizens indicates the scope of its operation. It has opposed the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 since the said bill which aims to give citizenship status to migrants belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Christian and Parsi community from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh will put Assam in a critical stage of losing its land, resources, jobs, identity, culture and tradition. It asserts its commitment to protecting the land and identity of its people through its stand against CAB of 2016 and CAA of 2019. The struggle against corruption in the Public Distribution System (PDS) in Assam, land mafias, corporate exploitation of agricultural and peasant land in Assam has showed the exclusive jurisdiction of the organisation. Likewise it wants to continue with the struggle for a land law in Assam that is in tune with the regional sentiment of Assam. It has regularly written letters to the Government to replace the colonial Assam Land Revenue and Regulation Act of 1886 with a progressive land law for the people of Assam.<sup>7</sup> On 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> August 2014, a team of KMSS went to the *Dhansiri Mahkuma* of Assam-Nagaland border area where some ‘Naga miscreants’<sup>8</sup> went on a rampage killing people and burning hundreds of homes of Assamese people and forcibly taking away the lands of the local people of Assam.<sup>9</sup> Besides demanding

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<sup>7</sup> KMSS do not have a template for the same but have put forward its ideal land relations and laws which was discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> Gogoi specifically uses the term ‘Naga miscreants’ in the article ‘*Himantobaxik Nirapotta Dibo Kune?*’ See Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhora*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> It was reported that the miscreants burnt over 200 houses, after which around 10,000 people fled to Uriamghat. Accessed from [https://idsa.in/idsacomments/ExaminingtheAssamNagalandBorder\\_ngoswami\\_210814\\_on\\_21.12.2019](https://idsa.in/idsacomments/ExaminingtheAssamNagalandBorder_ngoswami_210814_on_21.12.2019). Also Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013-March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p, 233.

adequate security forces at the borderland to prevent such outbreak, KMSS, concerned of the security of the 'Assamese' people, declared that it stands with the struggle of the people of Assam at the borderland. Akhil Gogoi was gravely concerned of the areas/territory of Assam being taken away by Nagaland. Calling the Nagas as 'miscreants', 'terrorists'; KMSS affirms its loyalty and concern only to the people residing in Assam and its territory. In this episode, the peasant organisation was particularly concerned of the encroachment of Assam's territory by Nagaland, blaming the Central Government, Government of Assam and Government of Nagaland involved in the border issue. KMSS staged many dharnas including gheraoing of Nagaland Bhawan in Guwahati which shows its close identification with the people of Assam and the region as a whole. The organisation has also been vocal against 'outsiders' buying land in Assam, which poses a threat not only to peasant land but also to the Assamese identity as a whole. On 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2013, around 5000 peasants of KMSS were outside the District Commissioner's office of Kamrup (rural) at Amingaon<sup>10</sup> against the selling of peasant land to the big capitalists, Suresh Prithani, Kailash Lohia and Ram Avtar Burakia.<sup>11</sup> With slogans, '*Krishi Bhoomi roikha korok*' (Save Peasant Land), '*Boniak bahiskar korok*' (Boycott *Banias*), it was reasserting its allegiance to the people of Assam and utmost distrust and intolerable for outsiders. The peasant issues were given nationalist angle, about saving the peasant land and the composite identity, culture which is in a threat of becoming a minority and extinct in the face of globalisation.

Interestingly, the slogans and banners of KMSS saying, '*Joi Aai Axom*' (long live mother Assam); "*Congress Hatao, Desh Bachao*" (Remove Congress, Save the Country); '*Aamak ekhon Durniti mukto Axom lage*' (We want a corruption free Assam); '*Stop Big Dam, Save Assam*'; '*Tej Dim Tel Niduu*' (We will give blood, but not oil); is strictly centered on 'Assam' and its own idea of development. Their addressing the public as '*Axom Baxi Raiz*' (residents of Assam) shows identifying the people with the geographical territory of Assam. Trying to emphasize on the region and its people on each trivial issue, the organisation seek to establish a relation with the peasants and the region as a whole. Emphasizing on '*Saving Assam*' or demanding '*special status to Assam*' it is attaching itself

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<sup>10</sup> Amingaon is an emerging commercial town in North Guwahati, located on the northern part of the river Brahmaputra and is the district headquarter of Kamrup (Rural) of Assam.

<sup>11</sup> Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013-March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 44.

to the region and the people. Remarkably, the organisation has said that ‘*if we can’t save the peasant land, the Assamese society will eventually become extinct*’.<sup>12</sup> This correlation makes not only peasant issues as the state’s issues but also the attempt by KMSS to portray it as a regional organisation in tune with its regional sentiments. The regional assertion of KMSS becomes more apparent when Akhil Gogoi in a public rally against the CAB at Moran in 2017, openly declared to the crowd of picking up *Hengdang* and fighting for the motherland Assam.<sup>13</sup> *Hengdang* is a traditional sword-like weapon used by the Ahom monarchy in the medieval period and this weapon finds suitable acceptance among the Assamese as having the valor and pride where the Ahoms used the Hengdang in its popular win against the outsiders/invaders.<sup>14</sup>

SMSS, the student’s organisation of KMSS have also paved its own way by engaging on the specific issues of schools, colleges, universities throughout Assam. It attempts to make geography and history of Assam as compulsory subjects of school curriculum<sup>15</sup> and also at making Assamese language a compulsory subject in all the English-medium schools of Assam.<sup>16</sup> Apart from the issues and problems of the students of Assam, the student’s movement of SMSS also addresses the major national problem and crisis of Assam. The real objective of SMSS as mentioned in its constitution is societal change through progressive movement.<sup>17</sup> SMSS has also been working along with the local cultures and sentiment of Assam and its people. Along with its parent organisation KMSS, it too annually observes 1) *Xilpi Divas* (Artists day), 17<sup>th</sup> January; 2) *Bishnu Rabha Divas*, 20<sup>th</sup> June; 3) *Pratistha Divas* (Foundation Day), 22<sup>nd</sup> August; 4) Day of opposing Imperialism; 5) *Bhagat Singh Divas* and 6) *World Environment Day*, 5<sup>th</sup> June.<sup>18</sup> Situating the present crisis of education and its institutions as an outcome of the neoliberal policies of the state, SMSS has also engaged with the common issues like the price rise, unemployment, corruption etc, pertaining to the region.

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<sup>12</sup> Watch Akhil Gogoi’s interview with The Wire at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yqZvLjohGo>, published on January 10, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Watch Akhil Gogoi’s interview with The Wire at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yqZvLjohGo>, published on January 10, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> The particular reference here is made of Ahom general Lachit Barphukan who fought against the Mughals and won the battle. Ahoms used the Hengdang in its popular win against the outsiders or invaders.

<sup>15</sup> This is one of the objectives of the SMSS, the student’s organisation of KMSS. See the Constitution, Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti.

<sup>16</sup> Constitution, Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti.

<sup>17</sup> Constitution, Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti.

<sup>18</sup> Constitution, Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti.

Its constitution states, “We aim for a new, nationalist, and progressive educational system. We need a new student’s movement in Assam to address the issues of unemployment; to strengthen the agriculture, business and trade; to develop a sound economic system for the region. We need a new student's movement with a scientific temperament to address the long standing issues of Assam like migration, unemployment, foreigner’s, floods, erosion, displacement.”<sup>19</sup> The principles and ethics of the student’s organisation has been outlined in its constitution which are mentioned below

- 1) A broad national consciousness free from sectarian, communal and selfish interests;
- 2) A progressive ideology of belongingness, love and service to the people of Assam;
- 3) A dream of establishing people’s democracy;
- 4) To refrain from aligning from narrow casteist, communalistic and other superstitious beliefs;
- 5) To oppose liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation and cultivate new democratic thoughts;
- 6) To respect the rights of all the communities of Assam.<sup>20</sup>

All the principles of SMSS are liable to the region and its development.

These national assertions of KMSS with Assam’s larger interests have evolved gradually. The discussion hereafter will reflect on the specific grounds where KMSS’s nationalism and its allegiance to Assam can be figured.

#### **4.2 The Jyoti-Bishnu ideas- Mobilising Ideology of KMSS**

Akhil Gogoi has expressed the ideology of KMSS many times. In an interview in 2010 with *Amar Axom*, a leading Assamese daily newspaper Gogoi said, “*We are an organisation for the poor and we have established ourselves as a left organisation. KMSS is a mass organisation yet it has not transformed itself to a revolutionary political group. But we have*

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<sup>19</sup> Constitution, Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti.

<sup>20</sup> Constitution, Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti.



*germinated the seeds of real revolutionary political party.*<sup>21</sup> In the same interview Gogoi said, “We believe in scientific socialism. We don’t call ourselves to be Marxists, but we are always with the masses and try to adopt the ideology of the masses”.<sup>22</sup> “In the ideology that we believe in, the masses do not have to come to us, we go to the masses”, Gogoi said.<sup>23</sup> In another instance Gogoi said, “*We believe in people’s ideology. Religion was the philosophy of the medieval era. Nationalism is the philosophy of the bourgeoisie and the middle class. On the other hand, Marxism is the philosophy of the masses. But we believe in modern Marxism, where nationalism is emphasized. We are trying to move forward with an ideology built on our heritage, our tradition, our folk tales and fables, folk culture and progressivism.*”<sup>24</sup> “*We believe in Jyotiprasad’s philosophy. We want to establish ourselves with Jyoti-Bishnu’s heritage*” said Akhil Gogoi.<sup>25</sup> The constitution of KMSS says, “With Bishnu Prasad Rabha’s ideology, we aim to build a united and wide-spread struggle among the masses”.<sup>26</sup> “The ideas of two cultural icons- Jyotiprasad Agarwalla and Bishnu Prasad Rabha have helped shape the ideology of KMSS”, Akhil Gogoi once said in an interview.<sup>27</sup> The Jyoti-Bishnu heritage, that Gogoi talks is of **Jyotiprasad Agarwalla** and **Bishnu Prasad Rabha**, the two noted persona and cultural legends of 20<sup>th</sup> century Assam who were inclined towards left politics. Jyotiprasad Agarwalla and Bishnu Prasad Rabha were the cultural and artistic figures of Assam who used their art to express their ideas, ideology, the hierarchy of class society and the inevitability of the class war. Both of them are widely appreciated and celebrated artists of Assam, who were heavily inclined towards Marxist ideology.

**Jyotiprasad Agarwalla** born on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1903 in Tamolbari tea estate near Dibrugarh, Assam to Paramananda Agarwalla and Kiranmayee Devi is a noted filmmaker, poet and writer of Assamese language and literature who contributed immensely to the development of Assamese culture. Agarwalla established the Chitrabon Studio in Tezpur in 1934. In 1935, Agarwalla came out with the first Assamese film, ‘*Joymati*’, and became the first filmmaker

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<sup>21</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 81.

<sup>23</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 71.

<sup>25</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Jaiswal, U. (2011, March 31). *Face of Anti-Congress Movement*. The Telegraph. Accessed <https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/face-of-anti-congress-movement/cid/418595> on 21.4.2019.

of Assam. He established a cinema hall ‘*Junaki*’ in Tezpur in 1937. ‘*Indramalati*’ was Agarwalla’s second Assamese film which was released in 1939. He wrote a number of plays, most notable among them are *Sonit Kuwari*, *Karengar Ligiri*, *Rupalim*, *Labhita*, *Khanikar*, *Nimati Koina*, *Son Pokhili* to name a few.<sup>28</sup> Besides, being a cultural doyen, Agarwalla was also an ardent freedom fighter who participated in Indian freedom struggle against British colonialism and wrote a good number of patriotic songs to awaken the masses of Assam. While dedicating his life for the development of Assamese cultural tradition through media, Agarwalla was committed to Gandhian beliefs and philosophy till independence and participated in his full might in the Indian freedom struggle. But soon Agarwalla was disillusioned by the new government of independent India over the style of functioning, which he considered it to be similar to the colonial rulers. Exploitation of the vast and poor Indian masses and rampant corruption made Agarwalla openly express dissatisfaction over the Indian government. It was then, at the later stage of his life that he inclined towards Marxism for the emancipation of the poorer and vulnerable masses.

Agarwalla a Marxist and a celebrated artist, has profoundly used the cultural forum as a medium of expression, for the poor and exploited. Agarwalla also has a vision of a composite and united Assamese society, regardless of caste, class, community, religion and culture. Jyotiprasad Agawalla’s poem, ‘*Axomiya Dekar Ukti*’ (The Response of an Assamese Youth) is a reflection on his ideas of a composite Assam within the Indian mythological imagination. The English version of it is-

*I am Khasi*

*I am Jaintia, the Dophola, Abor, Aka,*

*I am the Singpho, the Miri of the plains, the youth of the Subansiri*

*I will be the victor,*

*I am of the Kachari, the Koch, the Mech, the Rajbongshi, the Rabha*

*I am the Lalung, Chutia, Lushai, Mikir, Garo, Mishimi, Khamti, the Angami hero*

*I fight for equality and friendship*

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<sup>28</sup>Hazarika, K. (2014, June 21). *Jyotiprasad Agarwalla: A trend setter in Assamese literature*. Accessed from <https://www.boloji.com/articles/16027/jyotiprasad-agarwala-a-trend-setter-in-assamese-literature%20and%20http://www.assaminfo.com/famous-people/22/rupkonwar-jyoti-prasad-agarwala.htm%20on%20on%2030.12.2019>

*I am the one who labours in the tea garden*  
*The Na-Asamiya, the new Assamese*  
*The Mymenshinghia*  
*The village Nepali*  
*The skilled dancer of the Manipuri*  
*Of so many hills and plains*  
*Of the waters of a hundred streams*  
*I flow, taking all in my path*  
*To be one with the Brahmaputra.*<sup>29</sup>

Agarwalla in his ‘*Axomiya Dekar Ukti*’ portrayed the diversity of the Assamese society composed of different communities across the hills and plains of Assam. The ideas of composite Assam, equality and friendship among the different communities, unity across religion and community were strongly expressed. The idea of building a united and communitarian Assam became prevalent in his writings. Agarwalla was more particular in forging a collective Assamese identity through assimilation, which was his idea of a greater Assamese society. It is interesting that Jyotiprasad Agarwalla in his *Axomiya Dekar Ukti* has included not only the ethnic tribes of Assam, but also the Nepalis and Mymenshingia-referring to the migrants from Nepal and East Bengal, enlarging the idea of the ‘Na-Asamiya’ or the new Assamese. This idea of accommodating the many different tribes and ethnicities in his idea of a composite Assam is different from the narrow ideas of the Assamese society as composed of only the original and indigenous ‘sons of the soil’. The idea of larger community ties and friendly relationship among the many different settlers of the Brahmaputra valley was portrayed in his writings. The writings of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla broadly reflected various aspects of human society such as oppression, patriarchy, injustice, inequality and various societal prejudices and evils. The writings also led to the development

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<sup>29</sup>The poem was written when Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya were parts of undivided Assam. Pisharoty, S. B. (2019, January 19). *On Assamese cultural icon’s death anniversary, BJP pushes communal agenda*. The Wire. Accessed <https://thewire.in/politics/jyoti-prasad-agarwala-sarbananda-sonowal-citizenship-bill-bjp> on 20.06.2020.

of Assamese culture and identity in a profound way.<sup>30</sup> A popular song ‘*Our Village*’ (*O’ Amar Gau*)<sup>31</sup> written by Jyotiprasad Agarwalla in his play ‘*Lobhita*’, captures his profound ideas through the Assamese village life.

*O’ the village of ours!*

*In its honor*

*We are ready to die*

*We are ready to die*

*Full of beetle-nuts*

*And green fields*

*Shining from far away*

*O’ the village of ours!*

*The one, who is willing to die for the country*

*He is the young man of the village*

*We are not backwards, not downtrodden*

*O’ the village of ours!*

*The village can provide us*

*With a katha of land, a meal for the stomach,*

*A piece of cloth for the body*

*Why don’t we get these today?<sup>32</sup>*

Agarwalla made his work a campaign for uplifting the rural Assam and its people. Apart from Agarwalla’s efforts to work out cultural unity in diversity in Assam, his attempts at promoting the culture, art and literature of Assam have been praiseworthy. Dayananda Pathak notes that Jyotiprasad Agarwalla wanted to make his play- Sonit Kuwari hundred

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<sup>30</sup>Das, R. (2020, April 16). *Jyotiprasad Agarwalla: Creativity and Context*. Accessed <https://www.sahapedia.org/jyotiprasad-agarwala-creativity-and-context-on-19.10.2020>.

<sup>31</sup> Mahanta, R. (2018). *Jyotiprasadar Geet Aru Swarlipi*. Guwahati: Banalata Prakashan, p. 1. The song written is only a part of the original song.

<sup>32</sup> Translated by self from Assamese language.

percent Assamese, using Assamese folk music and songs.<sup>33</sup> A distinct nationalist and celebrated artist, Jyotiprasad Agarwalla whose forefathers originally hailed from Rajasthan, did so much for his birth place, Assam that every year his death anniversary is celebrated as ‘*Xilpi Divas*’ (Artists Day) by Assam in his honour. KMSS, too annually observes Xilpi Divas commemorating the literature and culture contributed by Agarwalla during his lifetime. KMSS through its various acts and programmes has championed the art and culture of the composite Assamese society.

The other doyen, **Bishnu Prasad Rabha** was born on 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1909 in Dhaka to Gopal Chandra Rabha and Gethibala Rabha. Bishnu Prasad Rabha was also an artist and a cultural figure of Assam well known for his contribution to literature, dance, music and painting which earned him the soubriquet ‘*Kalaguru*’ meaning the ‘Virtuoso’ or the ‘Maestro’. Rabha was also a philanthropist where he donated 2500 *bigha* of land in favor of the peasants. More significantly, Bishnu Prasad Rabha championed the cause of peasant’s rights and worker’s liberation. Rabha played an active role in the freedom struggle of India and was heavily drawn towards left ideology. This left ideology made him a revolutionary and he worked tirelessly towards freeing India not only from the yolk of the British but also its imperialist policies. Rabha joined the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) and adopted armed revolutionary struggle against the British in 1945. A communist and ardent follower of Marxism, Bishnu Prasad Rabha after India’s independence declared the independence from the British as ‘fake’ since thousands of the peasants in the country were still toiling thus took up arms against the Indian state and engaged in guerilla warfare. Rabha was thence also known as ‘*Xoinik Xilpi*’ (the artist who took up arms). Later Rabha contested the Assembly elections from Tezpur as an independent candidate and came out victorious. Understanding the ideology of Bishnu Prasad Rabha in the peasant society of Assam can be illustrated in his revolutionary songs...

<i>Bol bol bol bol</i>	<i>(March March March</i>
<i>Krixak hokti dol</i>	<i>the united peasants</i>
<i>O’ bonua homonia</i>	<i>o’ workers comrades</i>
<i>Aagbarhi jau bol</i>	<i>lets march forward</i>

<sup>33</sup> Pathak, D. (2007). *Jyotiprasad Agarwalla: Man & Mission*. Guwahati: Publication Board of Assam, p.34.

<i>Jaag jaaj jaag jaag</i>	<i>rise rise rise rise</i>
<i>Mozdur nojuwan</i>	<i>young workers</i>
<i>Nirjatit nipeerito</i>	<i>the oppressed</i>
<i>Krixak hoktiman<sup>34</sup></i>	<i>the mighty peasants)</i>

Another revolutionary song of Bishnu Prasad Rabha which epitomizes his aim of the struggle of class war in the Assamese society is noteworthy...

*We are the travellers of the revolutionary path  
The liberation of the proletariats  
Is the aim of ours, the fighters  
The pride is of the rich, the pledge is ours  
Be careful, be careful  
The rich, merchants and the landlords  
Be careful, be careful  
We are the fighters of the last war  
The ploughers and labourers of the world,  
We the poor will be victorious  
Where will you hide, O rich people  
Be careful, be careful  
The rich, merchants and the landlords  
Be careful, be careful<sup>35</sup>*

Rabha's songs were a medium of resentment, struggle, resistance which vividly describes the plight of the masses of the peasants and workers in Assam. His songs were also a clarion call to the proletariats- the peasants and the workers to unitedly carry its struggle and fight against the rich, the merchants and the landlords who are responsible for their

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<sup>34</sup> Translation by self from Assamese language

<sup>35</sup> Translation by self from Assamese language. The songs have been collected from Mahanta, R. (2017). *Bishnu Prasad Rabhar Geet Aru Swaralipi*. Guwahati: Banalata Publishers.

plight. Rabha used the songs as a medium of the voice of the poor. Rabha's poems and songs, there was an inherent connection between the sufferers/toilers and the inevitability of the class war. Rabha was heavily inclined towards the Marxist ideology which he made it a medium to express his songs. Bishnu Prasad Rabha was so touched by the Marxist ideology that he once said, "*Marxism-Leninism has brought peace and depth to my wavering, restless artistic life.*"<sup>36</sup>

To quote Bishnu Prasad Rabha further,

*"To merely portray the hope and despair of lower middle class is not art,  
To solely express the self is not the aim of Artists  
An artist is one, who expresses the pulse of the people through art."*<sup>37</sup>

Rabha's belief and ideology let him redefine the meaning of art- as something who has a purpose of connecting with the masses and expressing their concerns and woes. This unique and strong expression of the toiling masses in the revolutionary songs of Bishnu Prasad Rabha is unique in the history of art and revolutionary struggle of Assam. It may also be worth mentioning that Bishnu Prasad Rabha donated a massive two thousand and five hundred bighas of parental land to the poor peasants.<sup>38</sup> Besides this, Bishnu Prasad Rabha also had the deep love for people across different communities and ethnicities. Rabha was fascinated by Srimanta Sankardev, a saint of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Assam, who propagated Vaishnavism in Assam and founded the Eksaran Dharma- which rejects Vedic ritualism and unites all the people of Assam including Hindu as well as non-Hindu groups into its religious fold. These efforts of uniting people of all communities and creeds under the Eksaran Dharma were to bring all into a universal fold of the Assamese culture. Bishnu Prasad Rabha was not only a crusader of the peasant/worker's rights but he also used art, culture and literature to unite the people of all communities and creeds.

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<sup>36</sup> Gohain, H. (2014). *Xoinik Xilpi Bishnu Rabha*. Nalbari: Journal Emporium, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Gohain, H. (2014). *Xoinik Xilpi Bishnu Rabha*. Nalbari: Journal Emporium.

<sup>38</sup> The total amount of land donated by Rabha may be contested. I gathered this account from a lesson in school on Bishnu Prasad Rabha. It was in 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> standard.

KMSS considers important in keeping the thought and struggle of Bishnu Prasad Rabha alive, a champion of peasant's rights and worker's liberation. The organisation has claimed the Jyoti-Bishnu ideology as it adheres to the region's specific art, culture and literature, which plays a powerful role in organizing a society. Both were doyens of Assam's art and culture and also engaged powerfully with the Marxist ideology, with the poor, the peasants and the toiling lot. Both Agarwalla and Rabha brought the revolutionary culture in Assamese society by taking arts and culture of Assam, and stressed the need to bring changes in the socio-political and cultural life of the people. They were deeply disturbed with the conditions of the poor people and took the forefront in organizing their struggle through their poems, lyrical ballads, writing and activism.

This idea of sticking to the region's stalwarts who were communitarian and Marxists which at the same time weaved a popular sentiment among the masses as distinct doyens of art and culture of Assam was in total contrast to the weaving of popular sentiment of the Lachit Borphukan and the Saraighat battle by the BJP. Lachit Borphukan was the commander in general of the Ahom kingdom who successfully resisted and defeated the Mughals in the historic battle of Saraighat on the river of Brahmaputra in the year 1671. Lachit Borphukan is a hero for every Assamese in the memory of which Borphukan's born day, 24<sup>th</sup> November is observed as 'Lachit Divas' and is a public holiday in Assam. The Mughals attacked the Ahom kingdom a total of seventeen times but never succeeded in ruling the northeast region of India because of the successive resistance led by the Ahoms. The battle of Saraighat is popularly remembered as the resistance against foreign/outside forces to Assam and is one of the fondest histories among the Assamese. The attack of the Mughals in Assam was seen as an attack on the cultural and ethnic identity of the Assamese by the outsiders and the battle was often remembered to glorify the mighty Ahoms who resisted the powerful Mughals. Before the tabling of the CAB in the Indian parliament in 2016 and even before the BJP formed the government in Assam the same year, the historic battle of Saraighat was portrayed by the BJP as a popular resistance against the Muslims and Lachit Borphukan as the 'Hindu hero' who saved Assam from the Muslims. The 2016 assembly elections in Assam was fought on this same narrative by the BJP, calling it the 'last battle of Saraighat' to save the region from the influx of migrants where the Congress has based its vote banks and saving the ethnic and cultural identity of the people.



Interestingly the BJP's win in Assam and its rise in the northeastern states of the country has been termed as the 'Last battle of Saraighat' in a recently published book by Rajat Sethi and Shubhrastha in 2017. Exploring the rise of the BJP and the NEDA in northeast India, Sethi and Shrubhrastha argues that by focusing on many key areas like migration, development, terrorism, insurgency etc, the BJP could make its way in northeast India.<sup>39</sup> Infact BJP's win in the region against the Congress was termed as the battle of Saraighat. This historical appropriation and invocation of the Ahom past of defeating the Mughals in the battle of Saraighat and identifying and projecting itself as one is significant. Its emergence and removing the northeast India from the 'darkness of vision, darkness of governance, darkness of separatist violence and the darkness of indifferent colonial and national politics'<sup>40</sup> was hailed as its victory just like the battle of Saraighat which was won against the Mughals. "The BJP stitched together an unprecedented social alliance offering a common platform to the Assamese, the Bengalis, tea garden labourers, the Adivasis, the Nepalis, the Hindi-speaking and the indigenous Muslims"- the book observes<sup>41</sup> while not mentioning the Miya community of the char areas (the Muslims from Bangladesh who entered India at different phases of history and settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra) who have been eliminated from the BJP's agenda of the 2016 assembly elections. This electoral victory of the BJP was projected in the book as an ideological one, and even the historic Assam movement has been equaled with the battle of Saraighat-both having fought to save the *jati-mati-bheti* (community-land-homestead) of the Assamese. Projecting the migrants as distinct Bangladeshi Miyas and the Mughals as similar Muslim invaders, the BJP has effectively drawn the Saraighat battle from the history to suit and appropriate the sentiments of the Assamese and used as its popular cultural and ideological symbol. While Sethi and Shrubhrastha has explained the BJP's tactic to its victory, it says that the BJP stitched a narrative which pitted an indigenous tribal AASU activist-Sarbananda Sonowal against the potential Muslim leader- Badruddin Ajmal who is the founder head of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF). The AIUDF, founded in 2004 by Badruddin Ajmal emerged as the largest opposition party in 2011 with 18 seats in the 126 member assembly and 13

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<sup>39</sup> Sethi & Shrubhrastha, (2017). *The Last Battle of Saraighat*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

<sup>40</sup> Sethi & Shrubhrastha, (2017). *The Last Battle of Saraighat*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, p. 147.

<sup>41</sup> Sethi & Shrubhrastha, (2017). *The Last Battle of Saraighat*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, p. 148.

percent of the votes which was one percent more than the BJP.<sup>42</sup> The distinct appropriation of outsider invasion as Muslim invasion was their attempt to identify and relate with the Assamese and saving Assam from the AIUDF and Congress, which has good holds on Muslim voters. Interestingly, before the beginning of the Assembly elections in Assam in 2016, the Chief Minister from the Indian National Congress, Tarun Gogoi inaugurated a 35 feet high statue of the Ahom general- Lachit Barphukan in the midst of the river Brahmaputra in Guwahati. The foundation of the statue was laid back in 2011. Tarun Gogoi, himself belonging to the Ahom community left no stone unturned to glorify the valor of the Ahoms and the battle of Saraighat when the BJP started appropriating the Ahom history and the battle of Saraighat politically and ideologically. The assembly election victory in 2016 by the BJP was declared as the second battle of Saraighat by Sarbananda Sonowal.

Apart from the specific Ahom invocation to suit its ideological needs, the BJP has simultaneously drawn upon the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century Vaishnavite saint of Assam- Srimanta Sankardev. The BJP in its election campaigning have associated itself with the main Hindu saint of Assam- Sankardev, and launched an attack on the illegal Bangladeshi Muslims who have eroded the Assamese civilization and culture which was propagated by Srimanta Sankardev. Sankardev was a patron who worked for bringing all the communities and creeds of Assam under the *Ek Saran Naam Dharma*. The *Ek Saran Naam Dharna* is the doctrine propagated by Srimanta Sankardev of taking shelter under one God only. Srimanta Sankardev, too became a pivotal model for the BJP of invoking popular Assamese sentiments on the larger Assamese culture and tradition.

The efforts of KMSS are different from the simultaneous efforts of the BJP in the invocation of an Ahom past pertaining to the Hindutva ideology. The Hindutva ideology that has been invoked through popular culture and history is based on the counter narratives, cultural appropriation and glorification of the past. KMSS has relied on the Marxist and cultural doyens of Assam which caters to their ideology. While the BJP relied on glorification and invocation of the Ahom past, KMSS emphasized on asserting its cultural

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<sup>42</sup> Jaffrelot, C. (2016, June 11). *BJP's Assam Win Is a proof Hindutva has reached Areas Where it Was Marginal*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Accessed from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/11/bjp-s-assam-win-is-proof-hindutva-has-reached-areas-where-it-was-marginal-pub-63793> on 10. 12. 2020.

and Marxist path, both heavily drawn from the region distinct aspects. While leaning to Marxist philosophy, and by continuously emphasizing its inclination to Jyoti-Bishnu's principles, KMSS has been particular regarding the nature of the Marxist ideology it adheres to. Specific to the region, its culture, literature and language, KMSS affirms its philosophy and ideology in accordance with the Jyoti-Bishnu's philosophy. This affirmation defines the path it follows and also it makes it close to the cultural and national aspirations of Assam. KMSS has claimed Jyoti-Bishnu principles as its philosophy and ideology.

### **4.3 Cultural Nationalism**

Many a times, KMSS has affirmed its commitment to the region through its specific region-driven agenda and adherence to the local cultures and traditions. The organisation often idealizes the peasant garden of *Momai Tamuly Borbaruah* or the region's popular artists, Jyotiprasad Agarwalla and Bishnu Prasad Rabha, so as to be in conformity with Assam's popular sentiment. While committing to the *Jyoti-Bishnu* ideology, KMSS also engages deeply with the sentiment attached to the stalwarts of Assam. The Jyoti-Bishnu ideology and path paved KMSS towards national and cultural distinctiveness. KMSS's adherence and commitment to local cultures and traditions has emerged as a strong basis for the organisation to organise along patterns of shared culture of the people. Often it has publicly preached and upheld the Assamese national causes, which eventually became its agendas over the years. KMSS have also been trying to build a cultural movement which is about reinventing the lost culture and tradition of Assam in the wake of globalisation.

*Bihu* is an important cultural and secular festival of the people of Assam. The three *Bihus*, *Bohag* or *Rongali Bihu*, *Kati* or *Kongali Bihu* and *Magh* or *Bhugali Bihu* signifies the entire life cycle of a peasant of Assam, marking cultivation as the most essential aspect of an Assamese. Bihu in Assam is a peasant's harvest festival or fertility-festival, associated with agriculture and with the peasants. *Bohag* or *Rongali Bihu*, which starts with the Assamese new year, marks the start of the sowing of paddy in Assam. It is also called *Rongali Bihu*, *Rongali* meaning joy, because it is a festival of happiness and joy to celebrate the year long cultivation which is set to begin. In *Bohag*, the first month of the Assamese calendar, is the starting of the harvesting of paddy, the peasants prepares for the fields, a time of merriment

and feasting. The Kati Bihu, also known as *Kongali*,<sup>43</sup> on the month of *Kati*, is a time when the paddy fields are rich with crops. Kati Bihu is a time of less merriment, for the peasant's granaries are almost empty. Kati Bihu is also known as *Kongali Bihu* because it marks the scarcity in the granaries of the peasant's of Assam, *Kongali* meaning poor and indigent state. Celebrated in the month of Kati, the paddy fields of the peasants are full, waiting for a good harvest. The people pray for a rich harvest, where earthen lamps are lighted on the paddy fields to ward off the pests.<sup>44</sup> Known as *AkaxiGonga* or *Akaxbonti*, lamps are lit at the tip of a bamboo pole, to attract the flies and pests, which otherwise affect the crops. The *Magh* Bihu or the *Bhogali* Bihu is the festival of feast because of the harvest of the year long efforts of the peasants. *Bhogali* comes from the word, 'Bhog' meaning to eat and celebrate. So *Magh* Bihu, which falls in the Assamese month of *Magh* is a time of merriment and feasting, since the granaries of the peasants are rich with their harvest. This entire cycle of paddy cultivation of the peasants represents the culture, identity of the peasants and composite Assamese culture, a festival which is celebrated by everyone across age, religion, gender, caste, class, identity, ethnicity and the like. A distinct identity, the peasantry is so ingrained in the society, demography, culture of Assam representing the majority of the population. Bihu, as claimed by KMSS leader Akhil Gogoi, has been culturally eroded as a peasant's festival in Assam and has seen a massive change in the globalizing era. Television, market, commerce, communication and technology have taken over the peasant's festival, *Bihu*. For Gogoi, *Bihu* now has come to mean 'stage bihu' and 'company bihu' where different companies organise *Bihu* dance competition like Airtel Bihu, Aircel Bihu, Vodafone Bihu, Godrej Bihu, Officer Choice Bihu in the major cities and towns all over the country. These competitions which offer prize money to the winners of Bihu folk dance competitions have commercialized *Bihu*, which traditionally belong to the peasants of Assam. While Bihu dances are prevalent in the peasant societies, it was a celebration of joy and happiness. Gogoi still dreams of the *Bihu*, which he experienced during his teenage and youth at his village. He says, "Bihu was for the poor, destitute and working peasant's festival."<sup>45</sup> Gogoi further says, "The big companies now want to invest in Bihu. It earns propaganda, respect, reputation and business and takes

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<sup>43</sup> Kongali, is an Assamese term meaning a poor state or impoverished state of the farmers when the granaries are almost empty and they wait anxiously for the upcoming harvest.

<sup>44</sup> It may be mentioned that earthen lamps are also lit on every household, the garden, tulsi plant on Kati Bihu.

<sup>45</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhora*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 134.

pride of contributing to the nation. They earn a lot from these Bihus and that is why Bihu is their cultural capital. For us, it is an annihilation of our nation's culture, existence and the unity of Assam.<sup>46</sup> Gogoi refers to Pierre Bourdieu who says that how a section of the society establishes its hegemony through 'cultural capital'.<sup>47</sup> The cultural alienation of Bihu, a peasant's festival and an entity of the rural agrarian life of Assam has been lamented by Akhil Gogoi in some of his major writings.<sup>48</sup>

But Akhil Gogoi, besides correcting the existing corporatization of *Bihu*, also visions converting *Bihu* as a national festival of Assam. *Bihu* is the only composite festival which solely represents the working/toiling peasants of Assam. Gogoi quotes Jyotiprasad Agarwalla in this context who said that *Bihu* is the only festival in Assam which is secular and universally accepted by the people of Assam. Therefore for Agarwalla, if there needs to be awareness among the people of Assam on any issue; unity among the indigenous, religious and ethnic communities of Assam or any kind of cultural upliftment of the Assamese society, it must be done through the common festival of Assam, *Bihu*. Thus, in this highly segmented society, where the resources are exploited by the corporate companies, where the public sectors are being sold in the market, *Bihu* is utmost importance which can unite the people communally irrespective of religion, race and class. Gogoi opines that the Bohagi *Mela* (fairs) that organise Bihu functions has a responsibility to make the secular festival flow to the masses making them understand the true essence of it. He also tells his fellow people of Assam through his writings to use Bihu as a nation-building tool to uplift the working people who toil on the fields. Bihu as a cultural medium has been reconstructed by its leader, not only by bringing out the true meaning of the festival, but also the way it can be used to evoke genuine national sentiments among the people against excessive corporatization, capitalization of the economy as a whole.

KMSS has shown its attachment and commitment to the culture and tradition of the region in other ways. The organisation lamented the loss of a great Assamese poet Hiren Bhattacharya, a realist, whose poems represented the vast peasant-workers of Assam. Bhupen

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<sup>46</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhora*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 135.

<sup>47</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhora*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 138.

<sup>48</sup> In this context Gogoi has written two articles on Cultural anxiety of the Assamese society, concerning Bihu. See Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhora*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, pp. 132- 142.

Hazarika, noted music director, lyricist and pride of Assam, also was championed as a revolutionary figure opposing state power through his songs.<sup>49</sup> For, KMSS, Hazarika's songs significantly spoke of struggle, revolution and society reconstruction. Trying to give the title of a 'world class artist' to Bhupen Hazarika and 'Kalaguru' to Bishnu Prasad Rabha, the state has downplayed the importance of these personas in the Assamese community. KMSS has regularly called upon the people of Assam to look up to their songs for bringing about societal changes in the region. Recognizing their artistic contribution to the society, it is also emphasizing the revolutionary struggle and societal changes that was stressed in their songs and poems.

KMSS has been working to revive the traditional and historic culture of Assam by asserting the rights of the traditional weavers and artisans of Assam in Hajo, Sualkuchi and Sarthebari. For KMSS, the weavers and the artisans who provide a distinct cultural identity to Assam are a pride of the 'Assamese community'<sup>50</sup> and have underlined the importance of the weavers and artisans as contributing to the greater 'Assamese national economy'. To save the glorious Sarthebari's bell metal industry which is facing stiff competition in the market, it demanded special package of 100 crores from the Government. Interestingly in this fight, the *Axom Kanh Xilpi Xangstha* (Assam Bell-Metal Artists Association) joined KMSS and together demanded the aforesaid proposal. The organisation said in its press report, "The bell metal industry has been a rich industry of Assam since the reign of Kumar Bhaskar Varman of 7<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>51</sup> The traditional industry now is facing threats from smugglers, illegal artists who have captured the market as alleged by KMSS and *Axom Kanh Xilpi Xangstha*.

Besides promoting popular culture, KMSS has also at times countered popular culture with the same in its fight for the land rights of the indigenous. In July 2013, the Assam government carried out massive eviction drive in the Gorchuk area of Guwahati in order to preserve the historic Lachit *Garh* on the basis of a request by Lachit Sena. Lachit Sena

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<sup>49</sup> Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 117.

<sup>50</sup> Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 11-12.

<sup>51</sup> Bhaskar Varman was the king of ancient Kamrupa and the last king of the Varman dynasty. Bhaskar Varman remained a bachelor in his life, and so he has been popularly known as Kuman Bhaskar Varman, Kumar meaning a bachelor. Also see Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 60.

(Lachit's Army) a hardcore regional organisation of Assam named after Lachit Barphukan attempted to name a road in Gorchuk area of Guwahati as 'Lachit *Garh*' after the Ahom general Lachit Barphukan, though indigenous organisations like the Nikhil Boro Satro Sangstha, Aamri Karbi Satro Sangstha and Asur Garh Xongroikhon Samiti came forward said that the road should be named as Asur *Garh* because of the mythological bearance of King Narakasur, the ancient king of Pragjyotispur of present day Guwahati. The people of Gorchuk have been indigenous people of Bodo and Karbi community who are often regarded as the 'sons of the soil'. The indigenous organisations were supported by KMSS who came out with its own press release justifying their claim saying the area of Gorchuk and entire Guwahati had the prevalence of the Asur King Narakasur who was a powerful and influential king of the ancient Pragjyotishpur. Myth goes that King Narakasur who later became a despotic ruler was in love with Goddess Kamakhya wanting to marry Her. Goddess Kamakhya agreed to the proposal of King Narakasur only on a condition that Narakasur should build the steps to the temple Kamakhya within a night. But Goddess Kamakhya seeing that King Narakasur was nearing the completion of the said condition purposely strangled a cock to crow to indicate the break of dawn. This myth has been used by KMSS and the indigenous organisations as well to lay their claim to their lands which goes back to the days of the mythology and hence the proposed clearance of lands for the construction of Lachit *Garh* must be stopped. While accepting the greatness of Lachit Barphukan, KMSS corrected that going by mythological resemblance of Guwahati the road should be named as Asuror *Garh* after the popular king of Pragjyotispur, Narakasur and that in the name of Lachit Barphukan the indigenous people of Gorchuk must not be evicted.<sup>52</sup> This idiom of countering culture with culture and appropriating the mythological bearance has been popularly used by KMSS in its fight for the land rights of the indigenous.

KMSS has also been observing days to mark the historic struggle of the peasants against the colonial rulers that is the 28<sup>th</sup> January of every year as the 'Peasants Martyr Day' to commemorate the velour of the peasants of the *Patharughator Ran*. KMSS is organizing itself along cultural and literary terms and this has been its source of asserting its Assamese national consciousness. On 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2012 the organisation appealed the literary society of

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<sup>52</sup> See Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013-March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 63.

Assam to come together and save the Publication Board of Assam, a literary institution under the State Government of Assam. According to KMSS, the state elected an ineligible person to the post of Secretary, also disrupting the annual book fairs which the board organises at Guwahati.<sup>53</sup> This specific indulgence in the popular culture and sentiments of Assam, has been regular and continuous. Giving the title of Assam's 'national Martyr' to Pranab Boro, who self immolated himself in 2014, it portrays the spirit and valor of the Assamese peasant, asserting its rights in its extreme form. It has taken up issues such as 'rhino killing', corruption in construction of *Namghar* and such other issues which are of cultural and regional significance which largely aligns to the Assamese identity in all its manifestations.

For KMSS, the rural Assam where the peasants dwell, are the centre of tradition and culture. Turning the agrarian and country culture to the peasant's culture, KMSS has been focusing on the rural livelihood, rural economy and alternate rural arrangements. It has been trying to save the local and the rural cultures which are being eroded in the globalizing era. KMSS is reclaiming the regional space in terms of its culture, traditions, folklore of the people. The people's culture, it believes, is depictive of the rural setting, of the rural peasants and artisans and is one of the key to build a mass movement. KMSS has been working as a cultural organisation in a region of ethnic diversity and plurality. The organisation has tried to build a cultural base in Assam by engaging actively on the region's vivid cultural issues facing threat at the onset of the globalisation. The primary efforts of KMSS of preserving and saving the local tradition and cultural heritage in the globalizing era which is fast becoming alienated, has been its larger idea of relating with the region and its people. Akhil Gogoi once said, "*We are trying to move forward with an ideology built on our heritage, our tradition, our folk tales and fables, folk culture and progressivism.*"<sup>54</sup>

#### **4.4 Economic Nationalism of KMSS**

Another significant trend of KMSS's politics involves its deep commitment to the economy of Assam. KMSS speaks of the ways Assam can be a self-sufficient and prosperous economy. With adequate investments and due attention to the rural sector, Assam is a viable

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<sup>53</sup> The proposition was put forward in a press statement of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti. Gogoi, A. (2013). Selected Press Releases and memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013. Guwahati Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 156.

<sup>54</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 71.



resource for creating enough employment opportunities for the people. The economy that it seeks to build, involves reviving Assam and its viable economy through efforts at the agricultural and rural sector. KMSS has written and depicted in Kaziranga National Orchid and Biodiversity Park,<sup>55</sup> one of its co-operative initiative, the number of options for rural peasants to take as occupation apart from cultivable work. The park is a hotspot of preserving and projecting more than 600 variety of orchids, 57 variety of lily, 220 type of rice, many different spices, 54 variety of bamboo, cactuses, vegetable garden, nursery, ethnic Assamese food, medicinal plants, traditional bell metals, traditional peasant equipment made from bamboo, hand-woven cloths of different communities of Assam and also representing the folk dances of Assam. The diverse range is symbolic representation of the culture, identity and ethos of a peasant society. It projects an optimistic future of the peasants, showcasing the alternative choices a peasant of Assam can opt for, apart from the traditional rice cultivation. The park presents the peasant identity as vibrant, independent and self-reliant rooted deeply in the traditional peasant culture of Assam. Assam from the ancient age is known for its varied agrarian practices which have sustained over the years. The park projects Assam as having a potential rural economy, prosperous and capable even of meeting the growing market demands. With distrust for the emerging modern techniques of food processing, it aims to make Assam to an organic state. Bamboo varieties, medicinal plants, varieties of rice, orchids, weaving, bell metals, brooms apart from cultivating vegetables, rice and tea are options for the people of Assam. It had written to the then Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi, to revamp the animal husbandry, a potential revenue sector of Assam, by introducing modern technology, adequate man power and by new institutional support.<sup>56</sup> In the same memorandum it also sought urgent intervention by the government to boost its revenue by improving the horticultural scenario of Assam. Similar efforts have been made with regard to fishery, orange cultivation, bamboo cultivation in the region.

Condemning the repercussions and the evil affects of market economy in the era of globalisation, KMSS has been struggling for a fair market for the peasantry and the artisans of Assam as well as in support of a minimum support price system. KMSS in a bid to

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<sup>55</sup> Kaziranga National Orchid and Biodiversity Park is spread over 28 bighas of land in Durgapur village of Kohora, Golaghat.

<sup>56</sup>Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp. 327- 330.

facilitate the direct access of the peasantry to the city markets established a number of provisional retail outlets in different parts of Guwahati in 2013 to end the role of syndicate and the middle men. The outlets were run by the peasants themselves and were one of the first steps of KMSS towards establishing peasant cooperatives. According to KMSS, the market, captured by the corporate companies, businesspeople from Gujarat has been a threat to the local markets, outnumbering and reducing the importance of local markets. On 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2013, it has taken out massive protests in *Sualkuchi*, the silk village of Assam, against the fake and Chinese silk markets in Assam that has posed a threat to the local and indigenous silk market of Assam.<sup>57</sup> Naming the protest as the ‘*historical Sualkuchi uprising*’ Akhil Gogoi in one of his book has remarked the event as a protest against the present capitalist era of globalisation which have been a big threat and insecurity to the indigenous and local products.<sup>58</sup> Markets, for KMSS should be localized, benefitting the indigenous and the local people. Many times, the peasant organisation has written memorandums to the government asking for fair price of the peasant’s produce. It essentializes market economies but seeks to keep the market within the local. Akhil Gogoi says market must be for and by the indigenous/local people of Assam. The recent Farm Laws of 2020 which has been a grave concern for the lakhs of peasants who are protesting against the said laws which aim to deregulate markets from the control of the state. This move by the Indian parliament has been widely criticized by the peasants and the peasant unions who have been demanding adequate or minimum guarantee of their produce from the state which they fear that the laws would put them at the mercy of the private companies, thereby posing a threat to their income security. KMSS too have voiced its protests against the controversial farm laws and urged the centre to scrap the laws immediately. KMSS has also criticized the Goods and Services Tax (GST)<sup>59</sup> that was formally introduced in the whole country by the government on August 2016, claiming, that it will destroy the federal economy of the state. It has condemned the government’s idea of bringing a single tax system which have destroyed

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<sup>57</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhora*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, pp. 189-192.

<sup>58</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhora*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 189.

<sup>59</sup> The Goods and Services Tax commonly known as the GST is a system of taxation where there is a single tax in the economy for goods as well as the services. It is a tax levied when a customer buys a good or a service. Various taxes like excise duty, value added tax, central sales tax, luxury tax etc are included under the GST. For more information visit <https://www.gst.gov.in/about/gst/council>

the possibility of the independent revenue generation of the state, thereby putting a hurdle to the small traders of the region.

In a memorandum of various economic and social issues of Assam to the Chief Minister in 2013, it highlighted several important economic issues reflecting the overall plight and demanding speedy economic development of Assam. The said memorandum listed out 15 economic issues of Assam starting from comprehensive land survey including land holding pattern, sharecropping system, number of landless people, volume of uncultivated land; immediate land settlement for the landless; repeal of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act 1886, implementation of Forest Rights and Recognition Act, 2006; revamping of the irrigation projects; adequate attention to the department of animal husbandry, horticulture and handicraft and bell metal industries.<sup>60</sup>

The intense regional attachment in its attempt to uplift the economy of Assam, KMSS has regularly taken out protests, written memorandums on saving the natural resources of Assam from big capitalist and corporate companies. While lamenting that most of the region's natural resources like crude oil, coal, limestone, tea has been taken over by the big capitalist industries, saving the peasant's land from foreign companies, capitalists, traders is the most important national movement of KMSS.<sup>61</sup>

Besides its distinct ideas in making the rural economy a better and a self-sufficient one, KMSS has also been trying to remove the malpractices hindering economic development of the region. The efforts to have a fair Public Distribution System, lower power tariff in Assam, economic repercussions of big dams on the peasantry, adequate steps for the flood and storm hit people are some examples. In one of the articles, Akhil Gogoi mentions that the entire amount of deposited money of the people in the banks of Assam should be used for Assam's development where Gogoi has given statistics that only 38 percent is generally utilized in Assam.<sup>62</sup> These efforts at improving the economic scenario by boosting Assam's economy and removing its malpractices and inadequacies has been its primary economic agenda of its struggle.

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<sup>60</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti.

<sup>61</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhora*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 20

<sup>62</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhora*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 23.

KMSS is taking Assam as a whole to assert its philosophy, achieve its objectives and building its own ideal conception of ‘village economy’ central to the region as a whole. It is struggling to build up a self sufficient peasant economy specifying the idea of ‘village’ and ‘peasant struggle’ within Assam’s geographical boundaries. The idea of constructing the rural sector, and making it potentially viable stands opposite to the rigorous state led development in the era of globalisation. This model, self-sufficient and economically viable, capable of meeting the local needs as well as meeting potential market demands as has been envisioned by KMSS is to counter the capitalist model of development. Its edifice of making Assam, a strong rural productive region is one of its paths towards development and state building.

#### **4.5 The Federal Nationalism**

*“We seek full village swaraj in a sovereign federal India, and states to be more powerful than Delhi and villages more powerful than state capitals”- Akhil Gogoi<sup>63</sup>*

Regional assertions have been vivacious, demanding not only a secured economy but also greater powers of decision making. KMSS has been advocating for greater federal autonomy to Assam, which according to it is necessary for the fullest realization of Assam as a potent region. While it laments the widespread movements by many different communities in the region for greater autonomy and larger share of its resources, it also tries to understand the reason behind the movements.<sup>64</sup> The demand for ‘separate independent state’ for the Ahoms, Bodos, Karbis and other communities has been continuously asserted and reasserted since independence. For KMSS, the lack of adequate share of power among the different indigenous communities has marginalized them socially and economically. Akhil Gogoi in his book *Axomiya Jatiyotabaad* enlisted four important reasons for the increasing separate statehood demands in Assam. Firstly, even after independence of India since 1947, there hasn’t been any real solution to the problems and issues or real development of Assam. Secondly, it is because of the disregard or negligence that has been meted out to the indigenous people by the so-called high caste people. Thirdly, the insecurity of land and

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<sup>63</sup> Jaiswal, U. (2011, March 31). *Face of Anti-Congress Movement*. The Telegraph. Accessed <https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/face-of-anti-congress-movement/cid/418595> on 21.4.2019.

<sup>64</sup> This has been written in length by Akhil Gogoi in his book *Axomiya Jatiyatabad* where aspects of federal forms of governments.

identity caused due to excessive migration to Assam and lastly the non-transparency of the administration of the government departments and offices.<sup>65</sup> There has been a political, economic, social and a historical process where the indigenous communities and the ethnic groups have been marginalized, and in no hopes for better place in the administrative system of Assam, the different communities have been engaging on their own for separate statehood demands. The growing unrest and dissatisfaction with the system among the insecurity of land is what leads to demands for separate statehood. For KMSS, the uneven development<sup>66</sup> among the regions of India is a result of capitalist economy that has been adopted.<sup>67</sup> KMSS supports separate statehood in the sense that it will bring greater powers to the masses, will remove the economic and political problems of the indigenous people and will provide them due protection. But it fears, this kind of arrangement will only make the centre more powerful.<sup>68</sup> In this context, KMSS has been in favour of decentralization of powers to the grassroots of the country and more federal powers to the states of the region.

The federal autonomy, as the basis of *Axomiya Jatiyotabaad* that KMSS believes in is therefore the one that brings more power to the people; which addresses the economic, political issues of the indigenous people and which provides adequate security to the indigenous people of Assam.<sup>69</sup> The federal structure of KMSS is conceptualized as one which gives due recognition and powers to the indigenous people of Assam, like advocating reserved seats in the Indian Parliament and the Assam Legislative Assembly for the indigenous people of Assam.<sup>70</sup> The decentralization of the power structure is desired because of the ongoing crisis in the region on identity. It expresses dissatisfaction over the ways subjects have been divided over the Union list, State list and Concurrent list in the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution, claiming that the subjects bearing more duties and expenses have been allotted to the States, as a result of which the states are always

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<sup>65</sup> Gogoi, A. (2018). *Axomiya Jatiyotabaad*. Guwahati: Banalata Publications, p. 141.

<sup>66</sup> For Akhil Gogoi, this uneven development is a result of capitalist economy that has been championed and followed in India. Ibid, p. 142.

<sup>67</sup> Gogoi, A. (2018). *Axomiya Jatiyotabaad*. Guwahati: Banalata Publications, p. 142.

<sup>68</sup> Gogoi cites that at present the state of Assam is 60 per cent dependent on the centre, Meghalaya 85 percent and Arunachal Pradesh 94 percent. Gogoi, A. (2018). *Axomiya Jatiyotabaad*. Guwahati: Banalata Publications, pp. 143-144.

<sup>69</sup> Gogoi, A. (2018). *Axomiya Jatiyotabaad*. Guwahati: Banalata Publications, p. 147.

<sup>70</sup> This has been desired by Akhil Gogoi, the General Secretary of KMSS in his book *Axomiya Jatiyotabaad*. Ibid, p. 153.

economically weak and dependent on the Centre. To quote Akhil Gogoi, “The Constitution has given the rights over minerals and main sources of income to the centre. Deliberations over a federal state structure have also veered towards greater centralization. Therefore no fundamental change in Assam is possible through capturing power in Dispur.”<sup>71</sup> The Centre even imposes emergency rule on the state. These constitutional anomalies have been called by KMSS to strengthen the condition of the states within constitutional provisions of the country. Like Nagaland, it wants special provisions on security of land from outsiders as guaranteed in Article 371 of the Indian Constitution. It calls for similar federal provisions like Nagaland<sup>72</sup> and Jammu and Kashmir<sup>73</sup> in the constitution of India.

The federal structure that has been advocated by KMSS is also a sort of an ideal reconstruction of the ‘village’ and the ‘rural’ to strengthen peasant societies and economies where decentralization will be the underlying principle. The powers which are not within the scope of the village people to exercise, should be given to the panchayats, if not within the scope of panchayats then to the respective districts. According to KMSS, the centre should only have the power to keep the states of the Indian union united. The real and free ownership of the resources and the market should be owned by the native people. This assertion of decentralization of powers, is to give legitimacy to the village and its communities, entailing a different deconstruction of the rural life of Assam in its indigeneity. Strongly opposing the ‘imperialist loot’<sup>74</sup>, where capitalism has extracted the resources of the region in the form of Special Economic Zones, big dams, policies favouring big capitalists,

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<sup>71</sup>[file:///Krishi%20Mukti%20Sangram%20Samiti,%20Assam %20A%20brief%20note%20and%20an%20interview w%20with%20Akhil%20Gogoi%20at%20Sanhati.html](file:///Krishi%20Mukti%20Sangram%20Samiti,%20Assam%20A%20brief%20note%20and%20an%20interview%20with%20Akhil%20Gogoi%20at%20Sanhati.html)

<sup>72</sup> Nagaland is entitled to special provision in Article 371-A of the Indian constitution where the acts of the Indian Parliament would not apply to matters relating to a) religious or social practices of Nagas; b) customary law and practices; c) administration of civil and criminal justice involving decisions according to the Naga customary law; d) transfer of land and its resources unless the State legislative Assembly of Nagaland decides so. In addition to this, the Governor of Nagaland has special responsibility for law and order situation in Nagaland in consultation with the council of ministers and such other matters relating to the Tuensang district of the state.

<sup>73</sup> When Akhil Gogoi wrote about similar provisions for Assam like Jammu and Kashmir, the latter till then had special provisions in Article 370 of the Constitution of India. This provision was however scrapped on August 2019. Accordingly, under article 370 in Part XXI granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir where all the provisions of the Indian constitution do not apply to the state. The state had its own separate constitution till recently.

<sup>74</sup> Akhil Gogoi has referred the present extraction of resources of Assam by the Centre as the imperialist loot. See Das, D. (2010, April 18). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Assam: A brief note and an interview with Akhil Gogoi*. Sanhati. Accessed <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/> on 23.02.2018.

there is a need for the states to have full right over their own resources; an essential condition for empowerment of the regions. It advocates federal autonomy at decision making, and greater transfer of powers to the federal units. More federal powers to the state will ensure progress, development, empowerment of the rural and will end the separate statehood demands as envisaged by KMSS. For KMSS, the alternative to many separate statehood demands is an administrative system where decentralization and adequate power and authority would be vested on the regions. The desire for a federal arrangement is for the better development and progress of Assam. But this federal arrangement is further decentralized to the grassroot level, to sustain popular consent and sovereignty. KMSS is paving its own regional discourse by asserting for more dispersal of powers to the grassroot level and for federal autonomy of Assam.

#### **4.6 The Citizenship Question**

KMSS has been campaigning against the CAB ever since it was introduced in the Indian Parliament in 2016. Prior to that, KMSS has been actively fighting and campaigning for better economic opportunities and security of the peasants, its agenda for proprietorship of land for the ethnic and indigenous community of Assam has been its primary concern. It has been involved in guaranteeing positive safeguards for the peasants in the form of land ownership, employment opportunities, adequate wages, minimum prices of essential commodities and adequate prices for the produce of the peasants and the artisans. This economic security which it has been fighting for was for the local people, residing within the territory of Assam. Apart from fighting for rights of the citizens like pure drinking water to the people of Guwahati, land rights, protecting peasant land from Marwari businessmen, unregulated price hike of electricity bills and other economic securities, KMSS has been actively campaigning closure of industries which cause pollution, stoppage of the construction of dams and guaranteeing adequate safeguards for the citizens.

On 9<sup>th</sup> of May, 2013, KMSS *gheraoed* Assam Secretariat at Dispur and demanded addressal of its 19 demands, some of which are mentioned below

1. Adequate steps against the land mafias in Assam, demanding immediate arrest and CBI enquiry into the alleged granting of 280 bighas of state land to Suresh Prithani.

2. Strict laws against the industries and business companies which takes away fertile agricultural lands for private and commercial purposes. Instead industries should be set up on state owned infertile land, away from residential areas.
3. There must be one uniform law for the entire state. The people of the village or the local people must agree/have a say if there is a transformation of agricultural land to other purposes. The people who sell their land for industrial purposes must be given employment in the industries. The village people must be an integral part in regulating the industries of their area.
4. The state must take adequate steps for the protection of the 'green belt' and wetlands of Assam.
5. The land surrounding the tea gardens must be given only to the tea garden labourers in Assam.
6. The Char areas must be given to the landless peasants who came to Assam before 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1971.
7. Every person of Assam (indigenous and people who came prior to 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1971) must be given lands. Every person in the rural must be entitled to atleast 12 *bighas* and in the city/towns 1.5 *kathas* of land.
8. Minimum of 30 bighas of land to the small scale tea growers and rubber plantations.
9. Land rights to people devastated by floods.
10. 100 percent irrigation at agricultural fields.
11. Immediate implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006.
12. Implementation of Land Ceiling Act and Assam Tenancy Act
13. Minimum amount of land to be granted for industrial purposes in Assam.

These demands of KMSS not only prioritize the economic security of the people of Assam, it also stresses on the social and political rights. It has sought for affirmative action for the protection of the rights of the citizens of Assam. It recognizes those people of Assam as citizens, who came to Assam before 25<sup>th</sup> of March, 1971, adhering to the Assam Accord of 1985. The legal way of recognizing 'Assamese citizens' from that of 'foreigners' is holding onto the popular and the nationalist sentiment of Assam. Its continuous demands to updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) containing names of all genuine Indian citizens living in Assam was going through the popular Assamese sentiment. KMSS has been



pressurizing the government since 2013 for a fair updating of NRC when the Supreme Court ordered the updating of the NRC that year. The sense of providing security of livelihood to the ‘citizens’ of Assam continued in its resistance against the CAB and CAA. CAA has amended the definition of an illegal migrant dismissing the very struggle of the Assamese over the years. The quest of defining an Assamese identity was inherent in the ethnicity, indigeneity and plurality regardless of religion. Akhil Gogoi said, “Everyone, irrespective of religion, who came after March 24, 1971, must leave Assam.”<sup>75</sup> Gogoi further added, “An attempt is made by the Centre to divide Assam on religious lines. Till our last drop of blood, we will oppose CAB which is against the interests of the indigenous people of the state.”<sup>76</sup> The insecurity of the Assamese becoming a minority in their own land was expressed by its leader Akhil Gogoi as, “If the bill becomes a law, an illegal immigrant/Hindu Bangladeshi will become the next Chief Minister of the state and 1.7 crore Bangladeshis will arrive in India. Altogether 1.9 crore Bangladeshis will be given citizenship. Assamese may lose the status of the official language of the state.”<sup>77</sup> KMSS was strictly against the CAB because it was a threat to the region and its indigenous people which will not only make them socially and economically weaker but also politically weaker.<sup>78</sup> While KMSS condemns the large scale immigration in Assam across international borders, Akhil Gogoi says that healthy and progressive nationalism can solve the long standing issue of immigration in Assam. Gogoi adds, “The society can really progress and become democratic if the leftists become realistic, leave behind mechanical Marxism and pay heed to the national issues.”<sup>79</sup> Tracing Rogers Brubaker’s argument that the politics of citizenship today is the politics of nationhood and the politics of identity rather than the politics of interest finds relevance while comprehending the citizenship debates and KMSS’s engagement on the issues of citizenship

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<sup>75</sup> Akhil Gogoi in his article, “Who is a citizen? Who is a foreigner?” after going through the Constitution of India, Assam Accord, the Citizenship Act of 1955, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2003 has concluded that people entering Assam on or after 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1971 must not be granted citizenship and according to clause 5 and 6 of the Assam Accord the people entering on or after the aforesaid date must be identified, excluded from the voter’s list and expelled

<sup>76</sup> The Telegraph, November 22, 2019, p. 8.

<sup>77</sup> Pratidin Bureau. (2019, December 5). *KMSS launches massive agitation against CAB*. Pratidin Time. Accessed <https://www.pratidintime.com/kmss-launches-massive-agitation-against-cab/> on 15. 02.2020.

<sup>78</sup> Pratidin Bureau. (2019, December 5). *KMSS launches massive agitation against CAB*. Pratidin Time. Accessed <https://www.pratidintime.com/kmss-launches-massive-agitation-against-cab/> on 15. 02.2020.

<sup>79</sup> Gogoi, A. (2012). *Bideshee Samashya Aaru Jatiya Aandolanar Path*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 206.

in Assam.<sup>80</sup> The politics of identity finds more relevance in the citizenship debates of Assam where KMSS has followed the similar sentiment of Assam in handling the citizenship issue.

Expanding the idea of a ‘foreigner’ from the dominant Assamese nationalist’s idea; KMSS also includes the corporate companies in its ambit. Akhil Gogoi in his book, *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi* says, “We (KMSS) do not identify only the Bangladeshi’s or the Nepali’s as foreigners. We include the foreign companies also. We do not hold the same views like the aggressive nationalists and the ruling class”.<sup>81</sup> While it agrees 25<sup>th</sup> March of 1971 as the cut-off date for the detention and deportation of foreigners in Assam, it argues for land rights to the ‘swadeshis’ and to confiscate the property of the ‘foreigners’ who are duly identified in the NRC.<sup>82</sup>

The peasant organisation have been involved in the long standing issue of unregulated migration and have supported the legal mechanism for carrying out the NRC but have simultaneously opposed the CAB and CAA. Going by the regional sentiments, it has not adopted the Marxist ideology in handling the crisis of migration though it claims to be in consonant with Marxist thought and philosophy. It has been actively campaigning for a regional variant of citizenship which is confined to the territorial limits of Assam largely in favour for the ethnic Assamese and the local sentiment through popular activism, mostly by resisting the government. Anupama Roy uses the idiom ‘insurgent citizens’<sup>83</sup> - a practice of democratic citizenship through which the ‘frontiers of citizenship can be enhanced and make it a momentum concept’. Roy says that “it is important to affirm citizenship as such in the contemporary context where the modern citizen seems to have moved into a zone of indifference, an individuated citizenship determined by the security state.”<sup>84</sup> Roy argues that this kind of activism which takes place within and through the institutions of state actually strengthen state sovereignty.<sup>85</sup> In a recent book- ‘In the name of the Nation’ released in 2020, Sanjib Baruah makes a distinction between two different types of ‘citizen’- one who follows a laid out script- who regularly votes, obeys the laws and pays the taxes and the other is the

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<sup>80</sup> Brubaker, R. (1992). *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*. London: Harvard University Press, p. 182.

<sup>81</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 230.

<sup>82</sup> Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, pp. 230-231.

<sup>83</sup> Originally used by James Holston in his book *Insurgent Citizenship*.

<sup>84</sup> Roy, A. (2016). *Citizenship in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 178-199.

<sup>85</sup> Roy, A. (2016). *Citizenship in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

‘activist citizen’ who engages in ‘writing the scripts’.<sup>86</sup> Quite naturally, KMSS has been has been relentlessly fighting the government, its main adversary thereby asserting and making claims on the system ensuring basic rights and better living conditions within geographical limits. While this nature of fighting for the rights of the Assamese is distinctive, the other distinctive aspect is its hardcore support of the common sentiment of Assam to recognize those as Assamese who had the capability to assimilate within the larger Assamese culture. Assimilation remains the prima facie of recognition of ‘Assamese citizens’ as against the foreigners who do not or are not willing to assimilate by KMSS as well.<sup>87</sup> This idea of assimilation was rooted within the indigenous and ethnic culture of Assam. The debate on citizenship in Assam has been centered on ‘what it meant or ought to mean to be or become’ an Assamese.<sup>88</sup>

The attempt of KMSS’s struggle to assure positive guarantees to the people of Assam also affirms its commitment to the popular sentiment of Assam. Thus the Assamese citizen was perceived in terms of the region’s culture, and was not only delegated to middle class desire to eliminate the ‘outsiders’ or the ‘non-citizens’ from their share of employment and other ‘public spaces’. Also, the activism of KMSS has ascertained positive guarantees and rightful spaces for the people of Assam, most notably the ethnic Assamese. The larger idea of ‘becoming an Assamese’ which was echoed in Jyotiprasad Agarwalla’s thought, makes its way into KMSS’s idea of handling the issue of citizenship in Assam which is in consonant with the indigenous sentiment.

#### **4.7 The Assamese Jatiyotabaad**

Contemporary peasant mobilisation by KMSS in Assam, as has been discussed, has been motivated by rapid advances of state development in the era of globalisation. In its assertion to a secured peasant economy it has continuously tied the issues with the larger

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<sup>86</sup> Baruah, S. (2020). *In The Name Of The Nation. India and its Northeast*. California: Standford University Press, pp. 190-191.

<sup>87</sup> The idea of assimilation and inclusion as citizens was asserted by Rogers Brubaker. See Brubaker, R. (1992). *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*. London: Harvard University Press, p. 183.

<sup>88</sup> This argument has again been made by Rogers Brubaker while understanding the debates on citizenship laws in France where the debate centered on what it meant and what it ought to mean to become French. See Brubaker, R. (1992). *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*. London: Harvard University Press, p. 182.

Assamese society and economy. Agrarian questions have always been the nation's questions as claimed by KMSS. Over the years it has been engaging on issues of relevant importance to the region. Whether chronic globalisation and capitalism has taken over the lands of the peasants; or excessive migration has threatened the existence and identity of the local people, it has attempted to transform the ongoing peasant movement to a national one. In doing so, KMSS is situating the peasant issues within larger regional issues of Assam. Peasant issues are larger Assamese issues that concern the society and economy of Assam. The extent of its peasant politics has even extended to constructing an ideal peasant society and economy, and upholding the composite culture of the Assamese society. Better governance, people-centric policies, fighting for the rights of the landless and the politics of KMSS has made it imperative to understand regionalism as composite of tradition, culture and active politics by which it attempts to transform the peasant movement to a nation-wide one.

KMSS in its struggle and mobilisation has now and then stressed upon the Assamese nationalism or the *Jatiyotabaad* in many ways. More than a peasant's organisation, often it dwells on Assam diverse regional issues starting from immigration, CAB, CAA, rights of the indigenous community etc. Many times it has either joined hands with the larger regional organisations or supports organisations which aim for a unified common goal for the Assamese society and community. KMSS has, from time to time worked with other social, ethnic, cultural, literary organisations of the region, asserting its agenda and its collective vision. As has been said in Chapter 2, KMSS was established in the presence of 30 other regional organisations of Assam, varying from youth, indigenous, women to students organisations. The struggle against the CAB saw its association with many other organisations of Assam, as its joint effort to mobilise people. On November 4, 2018, KMSS along with 60 other organisations organised a conference meet at Sudmerson Hall of Cotton University against the bill.<sup>89</sup> The following month it leads 70 other regional organisations against the same. Its joint collaboration along with other distinct regional organisations of Assam, is a part of showing its allegiance to the issues of Assam and its people. It supported the 12 hour bandh given by the North East Students Organisation (NESO) against the CAB on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, 2019. At times it has led many different organisations against the

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<sup>89</sup> This was noted in my notebook

same. The allegiance of KMSS has been particular only with respect to Assam, its people, its territory, popular culture, economy, tradition in its entirety. The encroachment of Assam's territory by Nagaland in pursuit of a 'Greater Nagalim', and the attacks on the people of Assam in Assam-Nagaland border area was highly commended by KMSS.<sup>90</sup> It even boasts of as a *prokrit Jatiyotabaad* (genuine regionalist) in Assam. Dharmeswar Saikia, the district president of KMSS of Golaghat boasted off saying, "We were the first one to start a massive mass movement against the construction of dams. After seeing us, the AASU and the others jumped in the issue".<sup>91</sup> "When CAB was first tabled in the parliament, apart from KMSS no organisation ever led protest demonstrations in Guwahati. Eventually other organisations joined which we liked. Now we are heading 70 other regional organisations in our battle against the CAA", Saikia further added. Even the peasant issues it engages on have been focused exclusively on the peasants of Assam, demanding appropriate market for their produce, establishment of peasant research centers in Assam, regulation of vegetable market with adequate price of the produce. Starting with the fight for land rights of the forest dwellers in 2004, against the construction of dams, state water policy and petty regional issues which are insignificant for the national policy makers or the political parties (like the Bogibeel bridge construction, excavating boulders from the river-bed), it has brought the issues into the forefront and collectively raised its voice.

While the Assamese Jatiyotabaad has been its underlying principle in many ways, it has tried to forge a common national unity through this line. Over and above, the Assamese national aspirations of KMSS has been overtly been trying to grapple the burning issues of Assam. While trying to interrogate the senior leaders of the organisation, the leaders tried to relate these larger regional issues as peasant issues, since the majority of Assam is involved in the agrarian sector. The repercussions of the CAB and CAA were defined more on regional grounds rather than on religious grounds.

The Assamese national consciousness has taken different turns given the complexity of identity politics in the region. The rigid question of defining an Assamese on grounds of language, citizenship, ethnicity, indigeneity and Assamese culture has led to massive

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<sup>90</sup> Laskar, B. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013- March 2015*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, pp.348-349.

<sup>91</sup> Dharmeswar Saikia, personal communication, January 3, 2021.

movements which has subsequently defined 'Assamese' as inherent in these identities. The Assamese intelligentsia has, from time and again evoked *national* consciousness of the region on strict grounds of defining an 'Assamese' on these lines. The 'Assamese' identity has always been in a fear of becoming a minority in their own land. Driven by this constant fear, the Assamese have since then tried to assert their 'Assameseness', which has largely shaped their national consciousness. Time to time, KMSS demanded special status for the region urging the Prime Minister to make strict laws prohibiting the buying and selling of lands to outsiders.<sup>92</sup> It has demanded adequate security provisions for the Assamese people staying outside Assam, who are faced with a number of insecurities.<sup>93</sup> KMSS has embarked on these crucial aspects of Assam, which has been vital for the people of Assam.

### **Concluding Observations**

KMSS's agendas and goals have in the course, been nationalist in its form and orientation. This nationalism, which KMSS have endorsed in, is a resultant of its engagement over the concerns of the people of Assam and the Assamese society at large. This specific engagement has led to the orientation of KMSS as a 'region based' organisation, its thrust on the larger Assamese society, politics, culture, economy, tradition and folklore. Its way of owing allegiance to the state has been identified along lines of its alignment with cultural ties, strong economy and greater decentralization of powers. The following observations can be drawn from the discussion above

- 1) The chapter has depicted the nature of KMSS's politics in terms of its national sentiments to the culture, economy and governance of Assam and how intrinsically its regional inclination was against the capitalist tendencies of the Indian state. It has worked on the national sentiments by focusing on the specific fields that the state has posed a threat to and in doing so it has come into a state-society binary, a development that puts nationalism in a different perspective. This version of nationalism presents itself as constructing a self-sufficient and strong rural economy, complete decentralization of powers and in tune with local culture, folklore and

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<sup>92</sup> Here 'outsiders' means foreigners as well as people residing outside the geographical boundaries of Assam.

<sup>93</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010-March 2013*. Guwahati: Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 163.

tradition as against the prevalent capitalist, centralized, urban market driven states. Regionalism has been asserted/championed opposing state policies, ensuring prosperous facilities for the people of Assam and challenging the system that acts detrimental to the well being of the people. Trying to be democratic in spirit, KMSS has strongly asserted its belonging to the region by demanding rights for the people. Regionalism is not something which can be related by owing allegiance to the state, but instead acts opposite. This Assamese national consciousness has been rather assertive of its rights, freedom, due recognition, protection and safeguards for the larger Assamese community and Assam.

- 2) The nationalism of KMSS was not only a political movement to make demands on the political system. It was more of recognition to keep the organisation in accord and in conformity with the local culture and sentiments. It is also the social and cultural sphere that KMSS attempts to build through its nationalistic goals.
- 3) Significantly, drawing from the discussion, KMSS has used its regional element- the art, culture, education, religion, rural economy to penetrate and create consensus in the society. The infiltration into these sectors as an attempt by KMSS to further its grasp on the society and economy, rather than take the radical means where, according to Gramsci it is through these sectors, the state maintains its hegemony by creating consent. In a modern society, the people have come to accept the existing administrative, institutional and system of the capitalist state and KMSS very clearly stated it doesn't believe in revolutionary ideology by any means. So, in order to spread among the people, KMSS has strengthened the Assamese nationalism through specific engagement in the key socio-political, cultural and economic issues. The Jyoti-Bishnu ideology of KMSS is an amalgamation of the patterned culture and practices of the Assamese society, which identifies with the local tradition in its entirety. The adaptation to the region's stalwarts rather than the prime Marxist thinkers is a proof to the point. Its ideology was exercised in a practical sense, to foster the spirit and mobilise the public within the cultural milieu. KMSS has attempted to penetrate into the society through local cultures, traditions, working towards strengthening agrarian economy and larger share of decision making to the lowest federating units. This cultural nationalism and the socio-economic/political

construction of KMSS was depictive of the nation it was trying to build. The scope of KMSS is not only limited to regional assertions of its people but strengthening the vivid Assamese culture and the identity of which it is an integral part. Over the years, the peasant organisation has tried to grapple with issues of regional importance which secures the rights of the peasants, workers, students and women but also distinctly asserting its claim to the development of the Assamese society.

The new ways of intervening in the political process by effectively engaging with the core regional issues of Assam is an important aspect of contemporary peasant mobilisation of Assam. In the discussion, we have come across the distinct regional alliance of KMSS working on the composite community building and community development through popular cultures of Assam. It also urged for larger federal autonomy and economic independence for the people of Assam, mainly the rural lot. This demand for larger federal powers stands in total contrast with socialist ideologies over the world which centralizes power. Federal autonomy for KMSS will empower the rural and the grassroots. Furthermore the economic path involves engaging with the local agrarian economy. This engagement with Assam gives a different picture of peasant politics, centered on the local cultures, folklore, traditions, indigenous economy, federal autonomy and self-reliant rural economy. The peasant politics which have emerged with national issues is another significant trend of contemporary peasant mobilisation.





## Chapter Five

### Questions of Identity: Peasants in the emerging political scenario of Assam

The discussion till now has focused on KMSS's growth as a mass organisation in Assam. Its spread over the region's political, social and cultural milieu by pertaining to the crisis of Assam is where it emerged as a distinct peasant's organisation. It has also been discussed that peasants have been mobilised taking into account the prevailing situations and the emerging global crisis. KMSS has emerged as a powerful peasant organisation addressing issues that are vital for the peasants of Assam. Gradually, the organisation came to identify with the peasants, in vivid forms and manifestations. One of the important dynamics of peasant mobilisation and struggle are its participants. Sociological studies on the peasantry show that the peasantry has not been a homogenous category; it is divided on social and economic lines. The peasantry is a heterogeneous community, divided along caste, class, status, region in India. There have been peasant movements of the tribals, poor, dalits, women across India. Hence an understanding of the nature of this peasantry that has been mobilised will give a broader outlook on the character of its struggle as a whole. This demands a thorough analysis of the peasantry of KMSS in the emerging agrarian social structure of Assam.

The present chapter will be a narrative on the part of the mobilising peasants, which will depict the peasant's voice over the mobilisation and protests. The different categories of peasants have distinct cases of social, political and economic grievances and L. S. Vishwanath says that it is useful to study peasant movements as responses based on these grievances.<sup>1</sup> In a way, the responses of the peasants will be analyzed in a detailed manner in the chapter. The chapter will hence study the nature of the 'peasant identity' that surfaces in the course of the struggle of KMSS. It will try to understand the emergence and formation of a distinct 'peasant identity' in its struggle for rights, livelihood, existence and survival and the conditions that leads to the making of a 'peasant identity'. The chapter seeks to answer

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<sup>1</sup> Vishwanath, L. S. (1990). Peasant Movements in Colonial India: An examination of some conceptual frameworks. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 (2), 118-122.

the central question- how do we evaluate the struggle of KMSS when taken into account the responses of the peasantry?

Thus what forms the basis of the present chapter is the peasantry themselves, in their individuality. Major questions do emerge when we think of the peasants as a distinct category. Who are the peasants? Are they aware of the class/caste/community status at the protest sites? How do they identify themselves when they mobilise? How peasants becomes aware of their identity. Is it through the continuous levels of subordination or through collected forms of mobilisations or the work of ideologies? Is it constructed throughout history, or momentarily constructed to serve the purpose of the organisation. What role do KMSS plays in forging a peasant identity? How do the peasants view the leadership pattern of KMSS? While KMSS has been working on its own to forge a peasant identity, it also becomes essential to understand the account of the peasantry as well. Thus the chapter will not only understand the way KMSS has been organizing the peasantry along many different identities but also seeks to answer poignant issues of the peasant's idea of revolt, mobilisation, their alienation- mostly an account from the peasant's themselves. The chapter will provide an understanding the way KMSS has been able to build up a peasant identity and the way peasant identity has come to surface.

The methodology of the chapter has already been discussed in the introduction part of the thesis. The chapter also has attempted to understand the dynamics of the leadership of KMSS. From the leaders of KMSS, eighteen (18) of the responses have been collected who have been elected to the various posts of KMSS since 2010. The chapter proceeds with three different sections. The first section is an analytical enquiry to the leadership style and functioning of KMSS. This section is included in the chapter to proceed with a distinct understanding of the leadership pattern before understanding the mobilising of the peasantry under its ambit. The second section proceeds to engage with the people of Doyang and Tengani- who are structurally a part of KMSS and has resulted in its birth and growth. This will give a different picture from the general protesting crowd as mobilised by KMSS which will be the basis of the third section of the chapter. Thus, the third section brings the pattern of mobilisation and voices of the peasantry who form an informal part of KMSS and are present in various gatherings, protest sites and rallies.

## **5.1 Leadership style and functioning of KMSS**

The leadership of the organisation can be traced to the history of origin of KMSS when a number of youths took the lead in the Doyang-Tengani forest rights movement in 2002, among them were Akhil Gogoi, Sonowar Narah, Bhasco De Saikia, Bhaben Handique and Manoj Tamuly. When it comes to KMSS in terms of its leadership, Akhil Gogoi has been the most prominent face of the peasant organisation. Ramachandra Guha taking Morris-Jones's framework for understanding political leadership in India after 1947 has noted that the political leadership in India has used various idioms- modern, traditional and saintly.<sup>2</sup> Guha says that the leadership in India has used different strategies of political action- some who have taken to the streets while some in the legislature, where some leaders have deepened the democratic practice in India not all have done the same. In the realm of traditional politics, the identity of region, language, religion and caste have been used by leaders of India to mobilise people. The leadership pattern of KMSS is evolving over a similar pattern as explained by Ramachandra Guha. Over the years, besides mobilising the peasants on land rights, forest rights and on other issues concerning the peasantry and the rural, it has also significantly used the 'traditional idiom' pertaining to the region and its vivid identity as a strategy of political action. The prospects of mobilising people on regional identity have gained ground as a distinct effort of KMSS, more so in the recent times.<sup>3</sup> However it has been identifying and correlating the regional issues as real peasant/worker issues and issues of the toiling lot.

Interestingly Akhil Gogoi has become the most prominent face of KMSS, so much so that Gogoi's name is used co-terminus with KMSS by many. While almost all the protest, rallies and demonstrations of KMSS are led by Akhil Gogoi; media, politicians and commentators too have used Gogoi's name more comfortably in most of the cases where the peasant organisation makes headlines or grabs national attention. Where Sanjay Barbora has preferred to use the phrase- "Akhil Gogoi's KMSS",<sup>4</sup> daily newspapers preferred to use

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<sup>2</sup> See Guha, R. (2010). Political Leadership. In Jayal & Mehta, *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (pp.288-298). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> This line of argument is made keeping in the context where KMSS directed towards the regional commitments ever since the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill was passed in the Indian Parliament. This was argued in Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> Barbora, S. (2011). Assam's New Voice of Dissent. *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVI (28), 19-22.

Akhil Gogoi's name than the peasant organisation in their headlines.<sup>5</sup> Even the leading national daily newspaper of the country, *The Hindu* reported that "Akhil Gogoi's group forms political party" on the decision of KMSS to launch its own political party- Raijor Dal on 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, 2020.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when it comes to the peasant organisation, its prime leader is taken into consideration in comprehending its activities and operations more than the peasant organisation- KMSS.

On my field visit to Doyang and Tengani, people narrated their own ideas and experiences with their leader. Janmoni Saikia, a resident of Dighali Maaj village of Tengani was quite doubtful of Akhil Gogoi in 2002 when the evictions were carried out in her village. Saikia, then 15 year old was a 9<sup>th</sup> standard student who dropped out of school and formed 'Yuva Bahini' (The army of the youth's). Saikia participated in the movement and organised meetings in all the villages of Tengani in 2002. "There were days when we never went home and attended meetings throughout night. I thought Akhil Gogoi is like other *Netas* who comes and goes only for their selfish leadership gains. I even used to insult him and the other leaders who came", Saikia says. When asked whether today she believes in Akhil Gogoi, she affirmatively smiles and replies with a 'yes'. "I realized that Akhil Gogoi is a real leader who voices for our people. From my personal experiences I will say that whatever ill people talks about Akhil Gogoi I will always trust him because I know this person", Saikia told.<sup>7</sup> This trust and confidence on the leader was witnessed among the other people of Tengani also.

Nipen Das, 44 years, resident of Dighali Maaj village of Tengani, a hard core supporter and an active member of KMSS, tells that it was only Akhil Gogoi that took their problem as his own. "That man (Akhil Gogoi) comes and treads these muddy roads to understand our grassroot problems", Das told. On another instance Das told that Akhil Gogoi was not someone who compromises with his principles and the government. "Which is the reason I am drawn towards him", Das told.<sup>8</sup> It seemed that when any topic on leaders came up, people only talked of Akhil Gogoi. There were people who supported KMSS and its political party-

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<sup>5</sup> This can be seen in almost every newspaper headline.

<sup>6</sup> Special Correspondent, (2020, October 2). *Akhil Gogoi's group forms political party*. *The Hindu*. Accessed <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/akhil-gogois-group-forms-political-party/article32752134.ece> on 30.10.2020.

<sup>7</sup> Janmoni Saikia, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Nipen Das, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

RD only because of Akhil Gogoi. Khagen Changmai a sympathizer of Akhil Gogoi who was present at a major rally of Rajgor Dal at Moran of Dibrugarh district, was teary eyed when the topic of Akhil Gogoi's detention came up in our conversation.<sup>9</sup> Changmai, 68, came to Moran from Gaurisagar, Sibsagar in the early morning because he felt sorry the way Akhil Gogoi was incarcerated by the government. "He did nothing and the *asur* government put him behind the bars", Changmai burst out in anger. While my conversation with the people of Doyang- Tengani and those present in the conventions of RD gave the impression that the love for Akhil Gogoi was immense, it was because of the gradual trust that has been built over the years and the subsequent incarceration which proved Akhil Gogoi's innocence in the eyes of the public. The extent of criticism against the government was so harsh because of the incarceration of Akhil Gogoi that it was compared to an *asur* (demon). "Everyone protested against the CAA, but they are scared of Akhil Gogoi that's why they arrested him", Changmai told flatly.<sup>10</sup> The incarceration also gave a heroic image to Akhil Gogoi.

On a song on the upcoming assembly election of 2021 by Khagen Das, a few lines on Akhil Gogoi is noteworthy which depicts the strong support and faith it vests on the leader. The excerpts from the song are-

*The people of Assam will never forget Akhil,  
Akhil too thinks the same way for the people,  
Who never wears a watch or expensive shoes,  
Who sweats in the sun and drenches in the rain,  
Who can die for the land and the people,  
Who frequently lands up in jail for the poor.<sup>11</sup>*

These popular sentiments and undisputed faith on its leader has particularly arisen because of the qualities of Akhil Gogoi, more so because they can relate with the person. Many times, Akhil Gogoi assured his supporters that he will never contest parliamentary elections and become their ruler. "*Spit on my face if I ever contest election*", Gogoi once told

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<sup>9</sup> The conversation took place at the first conference of Rajgor Dal held at Moran on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> The conversation took place at the first conference of Rajgor Dal held at Moran on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> The song has been collected from Khagen Das's personal handwritten notebook during my field visit.

a crowd in a meeting at Tengani.<sup>12</sup> On being asked about the recent decision taken, of Akhil Gogoi contesting the upcoming Assam Assembly polls in 2021 from the Sibsagar constituency, Nipen Das was quick to answer that “*it is the call of the time and the situation*” stating the fact how the government has brought the CAA and incarcerated Akhil Gogoi. The readiness of the supporters of KMSS to hold up to their leader is nothing but the immense trust and faith it vests on them. Though there has been many leaders of the peasant organisation who from time to time been a part of it, it was only Akhil Gogoi people trusts undisputedly. The reason which came from most of the people of Doyang and Tengani is that Akhil Gogoi have never forgotten them and still comes to Doyang and Tengani to discuss their problems, while the other leaders of KMSS have either left or hardly came. The unconditional love and support of the people of Doyang and Tengani for Akhil Gogoi was witnessed at another instance. As mentioned, the eviction of the settlers of Doyang and Tengani was carried out in 2002 by the Congress government. Though the people mentioned that there was no eviction carried out by the BJP government till date, their resentment against the BJP was more than Congress. The criticism against BJP was more because it imprisoned their leader Akhil Gogoi under illogical conditions according to them. It may be mentioned that the Congress has won the Panchayat elections of Doyang and Tengani in 2018 and holds strong in the region. Hemendra Baruah while narrating his part of the struggle for land rights every now and then brought the issue of Akhil Gogoi’s detention and cursed the BJP from the core of his heart. “They (BJP) are the sons of Asur. Look what they did to our boy”, Baruah too expressed his anger as well as sadness over the year long detention of Akhil Gogoi.<sup>13</sup>

The leader of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Paresh Baruah once said that Akhil Gogoi is the Martin Luther King of Assam.<sup>14</sup> The leadership pattern of KMSS thus is a ‘one-man-show’ but it also depicts the efforts and qualities of a leader. In the year 2020, the critic of the government by KMSS on important issues was totally absent, when its leader Akhil Gogoi was in prison. In 2020, there has been a total absence of opposition and protests

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<sup>12</sup> Janmoni Saikia, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> The entire conversation between Hemendra Baruah, Janmoni Saikia and Nipen Das took place at Janmoni Saikia’s residence on 02.01.2021.

<sup>14</sup> Goswami, P. (2011, October 13). *Assam Farmer killing and the role of Akhil Gogoi*. Times of Assam. Retrieved from <https://www.timesofassam.com/headlines/assam-farmer-killing-and-role-of-akhil-gogoi/>

on the opening of toll gates at new places within Assam, approval of coal mining in the Dehing Patkai wildlife sanctuary by the Central Government and alleged corruption in the Prime Minister-Kisan scheme in Assam. There were many instances of corruption, Baghjan gas blowout<sup>15</sup> which showed little or no protest from KMSS which otherwise would have been major issues of mobilisation with Akhil Gogoi. Hiren Gohain, a noted scholar and leading intelligentsia of Assam, to my question on the drawback of KMSS focused on the leadership issue and replied that a band of experienced and devoted workers in different regions is yet to emerge. Gohain said, “KMSS has to develop methods to keep itself vibrant when Akhil Gogoi is subjected to prolonged imprisonment”.<sup>16</sup> The lack of leaders is a serious drawback of KMSS and the weakening of the organisation after Akhil Gogoi has been incarcerated is a proof. The organisation almost failed to mobilise in important issues of the region which otherwise would have drawn strong mobilisation in Akhil Gogoi’s presence. Akhil Gogoi became the sole strong voice of opposition against the government on different issues starting from land rights to corruption in Assam so much so that Gogoi became synonymous with the organisation. KMSS was the brainchild of Gogoi and in due course of time it was only Gogoi who became popular and brought recognition to the peasant organisation. The mobilisation of people from the remote areas of Assam has been an operation of the leadership of KMSS. Bimala Das a resident of Dighali Maaj Gaon of Tengani narrates her experience of going to Guwahati for protests because of a phone call from Akhil Gogoi...

*We would be working on our fields, picking up tea leaves from our garden when Akhil Gogoi would call us to come to Guwahati for a protest. In 10 minutes I would get ready and pack my bags and board the train.*<sup>17</sup>

The importance of the leader can be understood from the narrative of the Bimala Das who complied to the call of Akhil Gogoi at just a phone call. A poem written by Sangita Saikia and Munu Nath (in Assamese) which was translated by Aniruddha Bora in English is

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<sup>15</sup> The Baghjan gas leak is a natural gas blowout which happened in the Oil India Limited Baghjan oilfield located in the Tinsukia district of Assam which resulted to two deaths and heavy environmental damage to the fertile lands of the nearby villages.

<sup>16</sup> Hiren Gohain responded to many of my questions over whatsapp and phone owing to COVID-19 on 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Bimala Das, personal communication, January 2, 2021.



presented below which provides the apt description of the whole leadership style of Akhil Gogoi-

*Life has an end,  
Time does not.  
In the path of struggle  
Without Akhil, the people's struggle in Assam  
Has come to a standstill-  
Banners, placards, and a few slogans still holding value  
Are lying on the streets.  
Incarcerated Akhil is forced to watch  
Murders in his motherland, a home full of violence-  
And the king's great, false lectures  
Asphyxiate the people's voice.  
Corruption has multiplied its branches  
The tree of struggle is dying  
And the streets have become deserts  
For their personal political dreams  
Those fake leaders who once delivered speeches  
Why are they silent today?  
Those who signed movements on the pages of their ledgers,  
Why don't they speak for a movement to free Akhil?  
Struggles in Assam today are reduced to donations and monetary contributions  
And those who claim to represent Assam are sold on the cheap-  
Without Akhil, the struggle is fake.  
While Akhil is in prison  
The king is building mountains of corruption without opposition.  
In the path of struggle we see  
Traders disguise as leaders  
Pushing the real revolutionary to the gallows  
And surrounding themselves by securities.  
Today, the streets are not abuzz with protests,*

*Today, there is no real leader  
To free Akhil from his incarceration.  
For everyone is busy with their own calculation.  
Today, Akhil is forced to watch from behind the bars  
The deserted courtyard of his selfish mother.<sup>18</sup>*

The love for its leader is so much that Dharmeswar Saikia went on saying that the *Bodo* women of Doyang would come from their homes with *kasi* (sickle) if anything bad happened to Akhil Gogoi. On 17<sup>th</sup> of January in 2018, the Xilpi Diwas (Artist Day) was observed by KMSS. A picture of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla was kept in the premises of the office of KMSS with garlands of flowers and a candle light was torched to pay homage to the great artist. Since the philosophy of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla was followed by KMSS, I decided to visit its office in Guwahati in the hope of meeting its members. The office was crowded with its members and this was the first time I met Akhil Gogoi personally. The office of KMSS was a typical old model Assam-type house converted to office, located in a hill top of Gandhibasti of Guwahati. It has two big rooms. The first room was for the guests and for the press conferences KMSS conduct from time to time. The room was large and empty except for the rows of plastic chairs piled up to the top in the corners. The second room was for the discussions and deliberations of the leaders of KMSS. The many times I visited the office before, I was led to the guest room. It was only on that particular day when I met Akhil Gogoi, he told me to come to the second room where he was having a meeting with the other leaders and members of KMSS. The room, comparatively smaller than the first had cupboards on two sides of the wall which was filled up with dusty files and papers stacked up to the last room left in the cupboard. In the middle of the room was a big wooden table where all the members sat circling it. Gogoi purposefully led me to the second room to have a ground understanding of the discussion that takes place in the office. It was nearly 3 in the afternoon and they were heading for another discussion. It was there in the second room Akhil Gogoi sat with me for a discussion in the presence of other leaders who were attentively listening. My visit to this room of the office was my first time as well as the last,

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<sup>18</sup> Accessed <https://www.kractivist.org/poem-akhil-gogoi-incarcerated/on 21.01.2021>.

though I have visited the office quite a number of times. The approach of Akhil Gogoi was different from other leaders of KMSS which was partly evident from this incident. Before every press conference of KMSS, the room became an intense area of debate and discussion, the voices could be heard from the guest room from where I was seated. The press conferences were always addressed by the supreme leader. When Akhil Gogoi addressed the press, the other were seated by his sides agreeing to his talks. When Akhil Gogoi was in jail, it was Bhasco De Saikia who addressed the press. What I witnessed was that there was not a single woman member present that day to observe Xilpi Diwas. More than the majority of the members crowding the office of KMSS were youths and members of SMSS. Never did I witness any women member in my multiple visits to the office of KMSS.

My visits to the central office of KMSS always ended up collecting its official reports, memorandums and interviewing its members. What benefitted me was that, the leaders of KMSS were always ready with the official papers, depositions and other documents I needed. The leaders were always eager to provide the papers which it has archived since its inception. This eagerness to provide the papers came to me as something trying to prove its constitutional, democratic and legal path at times when it is heavily criticized by the successive governments as being undemocratic in its path. The organisational behavior of KMSS was noteworthy. After every three years, KMSS has been launching its press reports and memorandums in the form of a book in its convention/conference organised from time to time. The book titled 'Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti' has been openly made available in the market and to the common public. Thus, KMSS has sincerely documented its history in the form of its official memorandums and press releases which is in a way to keep a record of its character.

From my interviews, it was evident that the leaders of KMSS want a change in the system that has been favoring the capitalist class. For them a change in the system is possible only when there is an awakening of the masses on the ill effects of globalisation. Among the leaders of the organisation, it is the highly educated ones who are taking the forefront in every decision and struggle and their role has been significant. The leaders of KMSS are ideologically motivated, each of them having strong inclination towards Marxism. The leaders are mostly educated, mostly hailing from poor families with agricultural background.

Most of the leaders are first generation literates of their family which is significant. Akhil Gogoi, holds a Masters degree in English literature from Gauhati University. A graduate from Cotton College in 1996, Gogoi comes from a poor peasant family from Jorhat, Assam. Akhil Gogoi's father worked as a clerk at the Borbam tea garden estate in Amguri, Sibsagar. His father was bedridden for the rest of his life having fallen from a tree. With a family of 8, Gogoi's elder brother took up odd jobs of a labourer to look after the family and finance Akhil Gogoi's education, who had high hopes and expectations from his younger brother to take up a high collar job after his education. Gogoi's active involvement in student politics did not go well with his brother who was financing his education. "I used to fear my brother like a man to a tiger", Gogoi said, "and my involvement in politics deteriorated our relation for the rest of our lives".<sup>19</sup> Thus, politics was not preferred by Gogoi's family. Gogoi was elected to the post of General Secretary in the Cotton College Student Union elections in 1995. During his short term as a General Secretary at Cotton College, Gogoi led certain movements on student grievances and against incompetence and corruption in college administration.<sup>20</sup> Hiren Gohain described Akhil Gogoi as having a 'rebel temperament' in my interview with him.<sup>21</sup> Akhil Gogoi had a flair for active mobilisation and organisation of students in protest movements and was particularly motivated in mobilising popular protest against arbitrary and oppressive authority.

Akhil Gogoi was introduced to the Marxist readings as students of Cotton College, where a study circle named "Cotton College Study Circle" was formed in the late 1980s under the influence of late Parag Kumar Das, a radical writer, human rights activist and a journalist.<sup>22</sup> This study circle to a large extent oriented the youths towards the Marxist ideology. Akhil Gogoi, in one of his writings mentions how he slowly drifted away from his university course readings to Marxist literature. During his Masters programme at Gauhati University, Gogoi jointly with Hiren Gohain, came out with *Natun Patadik*, a Marxist literary

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<sup>19</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Parivartanar Akhara*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 146. Akhil Gogoi's brother expired in 2013.

<sup>20</sup> This has been narrated to me by Hiren Gohain, an eminent scholar and leading intelligentsia of Assam.

<sup>21</sup> The interview took over phone because of the pandemic on August 13, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> The information has been collected from Hiren Gohain. Parag Kumar Das was the former editor of *Asomia Pratidin*, a leading daily newspaper of Assam. Parag Kumar Das was a radical writer who was assassinated in 1996 in broad daylight by Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam (SULFA) members in Guwahati.

journal in Assamese language. Likewise, along with some other students, Gogoi also started “Gauhati University Study Circle” in Gauhati University. Later, in 2002, as an independent researcher, Akhil Gogoi went to Calcutta for a year where he embarked on a whole range of literature at the Calcutta National Library. “That one year in Calcutta made me a serious thinker”, Gogoi admitted. “I discovered a new world at Calcutta National Library. David McLellan, Ernest Mandel, Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams gave me a whole new direction to Marxist politics and philosophy. I read Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin for understanding neo-liberalism and globalisation. I took immense interest on the topic of nationalism. Later in the literature of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Rabindranath Tagore I found new meaning and scope. The collected volumes of Mahatma Gandhi became my friend”, Gogoi said. He went on saying, “From Calcutta College Street to Jawaharlal Nehru University library of New Delhi I went in search for books. Collecting books thus became my hobby”.<sup>23</sup>

This exposure to vivid literature oriented KMSS to a considerable extent also. Akhil Gogoi says that the exposure to the books helped him in understanding the problems of Assam. Before going to Calcutta, Akhil Gogoi was involved in research work exploring the life and philosophy of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla for 2 years in 2001 and 2002. Gogoi stayed at Tezpur at Jyotiprasad Agarwalla’s brother house to get access to the old files of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla. Later in the birth centenary of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, Gogoi along with his wife Gitashree Tamuly came out with Agarwalla’s biography- *Uribo Pora Hole Akou Jujiluheten* whose philosophy later became the core ideology of KMSS.

In 2005 when the KMSS was formed, Gogoi was a youth in this early 30s. Kamal Kumar Medhi, 42, another popular leader of the peasant organisation<sup>24</sup> who held the post of Joint Secretary of the organisation from 2013, is another educated leader with a Masters degree from Cotton College under Gauhati University. Both the leaders have been at the forefront of the struggle of KMSS and have jointly written many memorandums to the government and the ministries from time to time. Raju Bora, 60, president of KMSS from

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<sup>23</sup> Gogoi, A. (2021, June 8). *Pitrihom Ejon Xikhyaguru aru mur Rajneeti Sorsa*. Amar Asom, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Kamal Kumar Medhi left KMSS and joined the Indian National Congress on following rifts between Akhil Gogoi and him. Later in 2020, he again rejoined KMSS and became a member of its political party Rajjor Dal.

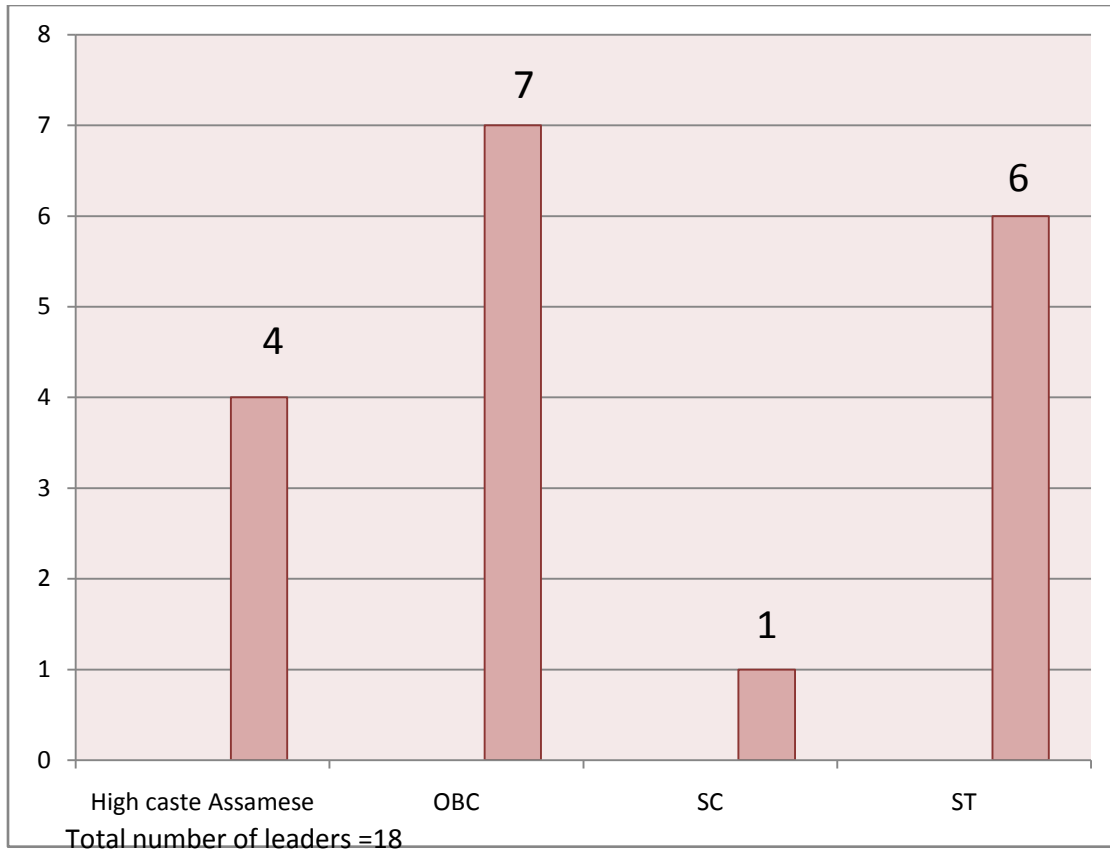
2011-2013, is a peasant by occupation. Mulan Laskar, 65, the founding president of KMSS, is a matriculate in the 1970s who firmly believes in the ethics of the organisation. Laskar is a writer and also a peasant by occupation. Dimbeswar Gogoi, 66 also cultivates his own farms and has been an active member of the organisation leading from many fronts. The leaders of KMSS primarily come from families of agricultural background. The subaltern representation of peasants in the executive body of the organisation finds expression and is hailed by the peasant community of Assam. A peasant of Boko, Kamrup says, “*Amar Neta kunu montri Mla nohoi.*” (Our leaders are not ministers or MLA). “They are our people and that’s why we are here.” Another one says, “*Krishak r dukh Krishak e he buji pai*” (only a peasant can understand the woes of another peasant).<sup>25</sup> This legitimacy from the peasant community makes KMSS representative and reaffirms the faith of the peasants of identifying themselves with the organisation and the leaders. The leadership which is mainly from the peasant community is male centric and is represented by people of varied age groups.

Out of the total 18 leaders, who occupied the posts of President, Vice President, General Secretary and Joint Secretary since 2010, four (4) are high caste Assamese, seven (7) are OBCs, one (1) SC and six (6) hail from the ST community. The graphical representation is presented below-

**Figure 5.1: Caste-wise representation of the leaders of KMSS**

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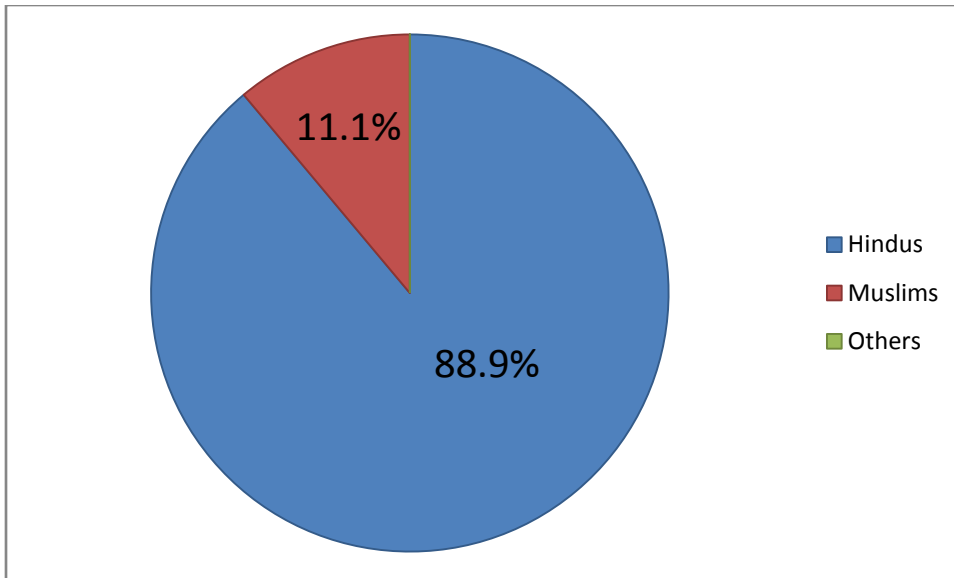
<sup>25</sup> Field work on October 12, 2018.



Source: Field survey

The table shows the highest representation of the leaders of KMSS among the lower castes section of the society. The leaders also come from rural Assam, which is likely because the election to the positions of the central committee posts starts from the grassroots of the region, taking the village as its first and primary unit which federates at subsequent levels. In addition to this, all the leaders come from agricultural background. The decentralization of the power structure can be attributed for these attributes.

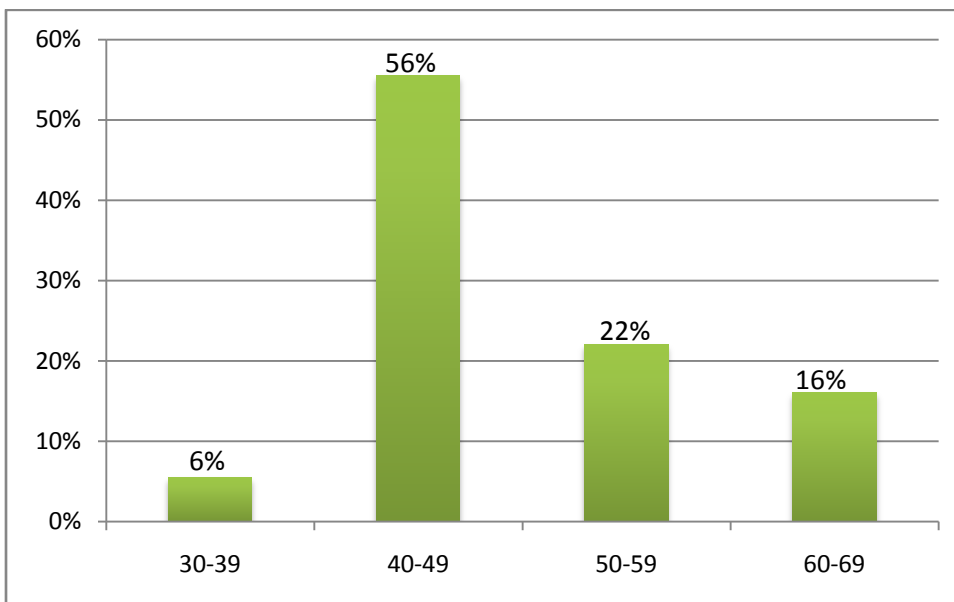
**Figure 5.2: Religious representation of the leaders**



Source: Field survey

The majority of the leaders of KMSS are Hindus while 11.1 percent of them are from the Muslim community.

**Figure 5.3: Age groupings of the leaders of KMSS**



Source: Field Survey



The leaders of KMSS come from varied age groups. In 2005, when many members of the organisation were fighting for the land rights in Doyang and Tengani, all of them were in their youth. These leaders have continued their membership with the organisation and have assumed prime positions in the recent years.

The social base of the leadership of KMSS is depicted in the data which come from a distinct class, economy and background whilst they vary along caste and age groups. There has been a total absence of women leader of KMSS since 2005 even though it has established NMSS- its women's wing way back in 2010 and has worked for women's cause. There is no woman even among the working members of the organisation. Women figure in major numbers in the protest sites but do not figure in the central organizing committee of KMSS.

The leadership of KMSS is suggestive of the pivotal role it plays in the mobilising and directing the masses. KMSS is leader dependent and hence it determines to a considerable extent the pattern and nature of mobilisation of the people.

## **5.2. The dynamics of the peasantry- social base of KMSS**

The struggle of KMSS's struggle has been centered on the poor mostly landless peasants and workers who are affected by flood, eviction, soil erosion, price rise, corruption and most importantly from the repercussion of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. This section tries to identify the peasant who has been a part of the struggle of KMSS.

### **I) The Doyang and Tengani field-**

The people of Doyang and Tengani, as mentioned earlier, remain my field of enquiry on members who are structurally a part KMSS. A big question remains as to how people of Doyang and Tengani identify themselves with the peasant movement of KMSS? Whether they look at the movements as a part of the peasant organisation or as a cultural organisation with a strong Assamese identity? If that is the case then what kind of an Assamese identity are they foregrounding?

My first visit to Doyang and Tengani was in the beginning of 2019. The houses of people of Doyang and Tengani are made of bamboo and other raw material, only the roofs of

some houses are of tin. There are hardly boundary walls among the houses, and the regions were partly hilly. Living in extreme remote areas with little communication to the Golaghat town, the people still lives in *kutch*a houses in the fear of future eviction by the government. The people of Doyang and Tengani had high expectations and hope from me when I went for the fields. The idea of me coming from the capital city, Delhi to study their cases and struggle was a hope for them for their decades long struggle for land rights. My surname attracted the people more. On reaching the regions, I was first asked my complete name, and the place my father originally belonged to by the people. Their comfortability with me started once they came to know my background, my caste and my ancestral place of origin-Dibrugarh, a town in upper Assam. Doyang and Tengani too fall in the upper part of Assam and there is a distinct affinity among the people of upper Assam, which is not the same for lower Assam, central Assam, northern Assam or Barak valley. The people related to me more when they knew I belong to the Ahom community. ‘There are many students who come here for their university projects but they don’t eat pork and *hukati maas*’(a type of fermented fish mixed with taro leaves)<sup>26</sup>, a local resident said while preparing the lunch. The people relating to me over their indigenous food habits and my identity were their identifying a fellow Assamese. Every person was welcoming and was ready to provide every detail of their struggle starting from the young to old because of belonging to an ‘acceptable caste’ and a *khati Axomiya* (genuine Assamese) resonates here. I was offered lunch more willingly by the household because of being an ‘insider’, of identifying as one of their fellow Assamese who resonates their eating habits.

Though the people of Tengani have faced continued eviction, the people amidst protesting against eviction continued its efforts in building a larger society on their own efforts. A revolutionary poet of Tengani, Khagen Das has been writing protest songs and poems throughout the days of struggle against eviction. Khagen Das’s “*Our Tengani*” (translated from Assamese from ‘Aamar Tengani’) illustrated Tengani vividly...

*Tengani is our larger place*

*We don’t fight and quarrel*

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<sup>26</sup> Hukati Maas is relished by the tribal communities of Assam and is not often considered as a savoury by the caste Hindu Assamese.

*We live peacefully.*  
*The larger people of Tengani*  
*We are brothers*  
*We don't have the high-low differences*  
*We are tied with a strong brotherhood*  
*We do not envy*  
*We are peasants*  
*We do a number of cultivation.*  
*The primary is paddy.*  
*Ginger, turmeric, taro cultivation*  
*We eat jaggery from our own sugarcane*  
*Mango, jam, amla*  
*We have beetlenuts in every home.*  
*Beetle leaves-Black pepper grows on our trees.*  
*Coconuts are on our homestead*  
*Makes our houses beautiful.*  
*Duck-pigeons, cow-goats*  
*We have ponds too*  
*Where we catch fish with our nets*  
*Which makes our dinner delicious.*<sup>27</sup>

Besides reflecting on the rich village economy of Tengani, Khagen Das also asserts the self sufficient economy of the place and the brotherhood that exists. Tea is widely cultivated in the region, some even cultivating tea in their homestead. On empty patches of land, trees of agarwood were planted, which fetches them a good sum in the market. While the terrain of the region is not even, not even an inch of land was laid barren. Walking through the region, one can get a glimpse of the self-sufficiency of the people, who produces everything they need for a living, starting from beetle nuts to tea to rice to fish and meat. Weaving is also practiced widely among the women community in Tengani. Janmoni Saikia, 33, is quite happy living in Tengani saying there is no scarcity in Tengani. “We have plenty and can have

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<sup>27</sup> Das, K. (2020). *Hojaag*. Jorhat: Digdarshan Prakashan, p. 50.

*dubela dumuthi* (two square meals) a day”, Saikia told. She further tells, “Yes, our roads are not pucca, our feet gets covered with mud when it rains but we are proud of our Tengani”.<sup>28</sup> From the accounts of the people of Tengani collected, the people are quite contended and economically self sufficient. Their efforts at building a greater and progressive Tengani is noteworthy. There were no schools and hospitals in Tengani till the late 1980s. Dighali Maaj gaon, a village of Tengani established its first primary school in 1989. Khagen Das, a resident of the village narrates the amount of hope the people of the village had on the school. The school was the result of the efforts of numerous meetings and house to house campaigning by Danda Gogoi, Khagen Das and Ceniram Das. They constituted a seven member committee for managing the affairs of the school. Funds of two rupees were raised from every family of the village for the salary of the teacher. Chanda Gogoi was the first teacher and widely respected by the people of Tengani. Khagen Das remembers that there were quite a number of students in the school mentioning a few- Krishna, Dilip, Bhadoi, Rina, Gojen, Bhaiti, Duleswar, Jiten, Horen, Tutu, Horubhoni, Bonti, Anjali, Nobin, Debkanta, Sintamoni.<sup>29</sup> After much effort, the school was provincialised only in 2013. Till today, there are no primary health care centers in their area. Hemendra Baruah says it was only under the active campaigning of Akhil Gogoi that a health centre was established in Tengani but after some days it was inoperative because of the remoteness of Tengani and no doctor was willing to serve in the region.<sup>30</sup>

Agriculture is a way of life for the people of Doyang. Good quality of rice like *joha* and *bora* and vegetables are cultivated widely in Doyang. “Earlier the place used to give us very rich crops of paddy, which we could even sell in the market”, Bimala Gogoi one of its resident told. “But ever since the dam was constructed on the river Doyang, it affected our crops and now we are left with only vegetables”, Bimala Gogoi replied in a sad tone.<sup>31</sup> Tea is also cultivated in Doyang, but unlike Tengani it is not cultivated on large scale. “We get around 20 rupees per kilogram for freshly plucked tea leaves and so people have started on

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<sup>28</sup> Janmoni Saikia, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> This has been collected from Khagen Das’s book of poems. See Das, K. (2020). Hojaag. Jorhat: Digdarshan Prakashan, p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> Hemendra Baruah, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Bimala Gogoi, personal communication, January 5, 2021.

small areas like 1 bigha to 5 bighas of land”, Dharmeswar Saikia told.<sup>32</sup> Each family have a pond for fish, and have reared chicken and ducks for the Sunday and occasional feasts.

Doyang and Tengani present a different understanding of the peasant organisation in terms of its operation, base and ideology. The regions, located in extreme remote areas have successfully resisted and built up a strong movement which directly sowed the seeds for the birth of a peasant organisation in Assam to fight for the land rights and other peasant issues. However in due course of time, KMSS has paved its road towards larger issues concerning the identity and culture of the region as well. For the people who have been a part of the historic peasant movement have strong emotion and attachment for KMSS. Hoimonti Baruah of Tengani said, “When we were uprooted from our lands, there were no people or organisation who came to help us. “Only the young boys came”, Baruah said referring to the team of youths who mobilised the people in 2002. “Till today KMSS have only worked for poor and helpless people like us who have nowhere to go”, Baruah continued.<sup>33</sup> The people of Doyang and Tengani identifies themselves as poor and for them KMSS is an organisation which works for the same, whether it is land rights or corruption. The experience of Horiram Bora, whose family was evicted in Doyang eviction said,

*“Our forefathers have been residing in Tengani since decades. When our houses were being destroyed we decided to form an organisation and subsequently we became members of KMSS. When the government is against us, we need a vast organisation who works for our cause. KMSS is the only organisation which took up our struggle and so we are a part of it.”* A 10<sup>th</sup> standard pass, Horiram Bora had no understanding of the complex state machinery or the principles that KMSS stands for. When asked about that, Bora was quick to say, “What else? It is for poor and helpless peasants like us”.<sup>34</sup>

Though academia and the urban dwellers have been critical of the way KMSS is more into its personal gains by diverting itself from real peasant issues, Nipen Das of Tengani while defending KMSS says it is ‘*homoyor aahban*’ (the call of the time) that KMSS had to go with different issues of Assam. What Das said was agreed upon by the other 16 members

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<sup>32</sup> Dharmeswar Saikia, personal communication, January 3, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Hoimonti Baruah, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Horiram Bora, personal communication, January 3, 2021.

present in the room. Their ardent support and love for KMSS was evident. “If KMSS would not have been there on issues like corruption, mega dams then there would be no one, I bet”, Rajen Gogoi sitting in the room said. To which Gogoi further added, “It is the KMSS who have always spoken up for the poor in Assam”. The group of people in the room regarded issues of corruption, big dams, price rise as their own problems for they identified themselves as belonging to the poor section. However their idea of being poor for them was on different terms. During my visit to Janmoni Saikia’s house on a Sunday, she was busy directing two quilt/bedding makers who were making a new quilt for her family of four. “Today somehow we got the money, otherwise circumstances never meet’, Saikia said. The people of Doyang and Tengani as mentioned earlier were resourceful and had enough grains and vegetables to suffice their family throughout the year. Every household had a number of chickens and ducks for their occasional and Sunday non vegetarian feast. “We don’t have to depend on the market for our food and that is why we are keeping cows for milk, ponds for fish and chicken and ducks for eggs and meat. But we can’t afford the rising expenses of our children”, Saikia said. Saikia was concerned with the future expenses of her two sons, one in 9<sup>th</sup> standard the other 4<sup>th</sup>, once they reach college and have to move to cities and towns. Thus, the people though boasted of being resourceful through their poems and talks, they were not strong to meet the market and there was a monetary crisis which was visible in their talks. In the 42 villages of Tengani, only two persons got through state government jobs as primary school teachers up till recently. The others depended on farming and allied activities. “All the governments have been an utter failure. Now they have made digital India and all classes are held online. How can we afford a mobile phone for our son”, Saikia continued, “Even if we buy him one, will he study?” The people thus can relate to KMSS’s indulgence on different issues as issues of the poor who are threatened by the policies of the government.

Thus, though the people of Doyang and Tengani were self sufficient with their basic needs of fooding and clothing, they were aware of the rising demands of the market. The money they fetched from the market by selling their produce, was only to suffice their daily needs. Other than that, the people faced difficulties in affording city education or building a pucca house.

The people of Doyang and Tengani were hard-core regionalist and it came out many times in their talks. Hemendra Baruah, president of BTUSS many a times while narrating his struggle for land rights in 2002 drew my attention to the issue of CAA and bringing the issue in the talks. ‘The government is not ready to accommodate us and give us our land rights, but they are ready to give those to Bangladeshis. All they do is to please the outsiders’, Baruah retorted. Boasting off with the sheer pride that they are the locals and indigenous of Assam, they were angry at the BJP government for not providing them with the share of land rights they rightfully possess but providing the outsiders the same through the CAA. “They love the Bangladeshis, not the Assamese”, Baruah told. The strong Assamese identity they relate was everything related to the ‘insider vs outsider’ debate. The Assamese identity was not only asserted to the share of their rights, but was reflected in the ego and pride they carry of being an Assamese. Dharmeswar Saikia, while narrating his version of the struggle for land rights and border problem in Doyang, was sadly talking about the way their houses were being burnt down in Doyang in 1985, by the Nagas. Suddenly the sad face of Saikia glowed a bit when he said in a triumphant manner that in their duality with the Nagas, the Nagas died more in number than the Assamese. A poem ‘Turbulent Assam’ (Oxanto Axom) penned by Khagen Das of Tengani gives the apt description to this discussion which is presented below-

*Let peace come to the turbulent Assam.*

*Reject the act which destroys the nation.*

*The people don't want turbulence.*

*Do politics in a fair way.*

*Respected Chief Minister, think once*

*Leave the politics, O Home Minister.*

*If an Assamese cheats an Assamese*

*Then the foreigners will have their feasts.*

*If the bill becomes an act*

*The hand with the axe will break your legs*

*Today there is no Bihu, no festivals,*

*Everyone is on a hunger strike*

*Once more I say, leave the politics*

*Assam is your birthplace, rest in Assam.*<sup>35</sup>

The echoes of its regional attachment can be heard through another similar song ‘The Burning Assam’ by Khagen Das

*Today Assam is burning*

*Because of the 2016 Citizenship Amendment Bill,*

*Today Assam is burning.*

*They have taken the peace of the indigenous people*

*And the food of hunger, and sleep*

*If the bill becomes an act, the indigenous will be homeless*<sup>36</sup>

The relating of their land rights as something inherent by virtue of being an Assamese is prominent. I visited Doyang and Tengani in 2020 and 2021, a time when there were anti-CAA protests throughout the region. The entire debate of their land rights was related to the CAA. Jugen Saikia of Doyang, a peasant and father of four was quick to jump and say- *The government will give the Bangladeshis land rights but not us. We are indigenous here.* Still dispossessed of land rights, the people of Doyang and Tengani were angry at the way the things have unfolded in Assam since CAB was first tabled in the Indian parliament. The people have largely identified the peasant movement in 2002 as a movement for the basic rights for the peasants but within the confinements of ‘Assam for Assamese’ sentiment. For the people the peasant movement is a struggle of an Assamese over their inherent land rights which one has by virtue of being an Assamese in Assam. Maina Tamuli of Tengani, a college student said in the debate, *“We are not asking for land rights in Bengal or Punjab. We are asking here where we belong”*. The talks of land rights and the large peasant movement always ended up with the CAA and their criticizing of the BJP government. Dharmeswar Saikia of Doyang said, *“That is why I have stopped voting. It is of no use. You bring them to*

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<sup>35</sup> Das, K. (2020). *Hojaag*. Jorhat: Digdarshan Prakashan, p. 10.

<sup>36</sup> Das, K. (2020). *Hojaag*. Jorhat: Digdarshan Prakashan, p.12.



*power and they kill us*". Saikia continued, "Even the policies the government enacts do not favor us- the indigenous people. I am a *Thengal Kachari* tribe and still even after staying for more than forty years in this forest I am not entitled to forest rights according to the Forest Rights Act". Although a good majority the people residing in Doyang and Tengani are Scheduled Tribes, they still do not possess land rights even after the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 was enacted. This act which provides land rights to the Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwellers in India permits those who have successively resided in the land for three generations, where one generation is a period comprising of 25 years.<sup>37</sup> Saikia tells, "In the name of FRA we were just given a *proman potro* (certificate) of the amount of land we possess but no entitlements to land rights".

The people thus carry their Assamese identity in their fight for land rights to strongly assert their claims to forest land. The claims to the land rights were thus based on their exclusive identity of being an Assamese. The Assamese identity that the people of Doyang and Tengani have been asserting is the very indigeneity to which they belong. Thus strong assertion of the popular Assamese sentiment and their claim to the land rights as being inherently related of their being an Assamese has driven the entire course of politics here. The people of Doyang and Tengani regard Assamese identity as something that needs to be protected. Citing examples from other neighbouring states, Dharmeswar Saikia said, "Look at Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, an outsider cannot buy land there. They have inner line permit. But one can do everything in Assam. Foreigners can have *Bhuj Bhaat* (feast) here. We need laws that these states have". With a face of trust Saikia looks at me and says, "You are some of the Assamese people who are getting education in Delhi. The issues of Assam needs to cross boundaries and must be addressed at organisations like the United Nations. Then only Assam's problems will be solved or else we will become the second Tripura, everywhere *Bongalis* (Bengalis). The Assamese identity must be protected". Saikia continued, "The Tripuris have lost everything, their language, their culture and today they are second class citizens in their own soil. The day is not far for us. Go to the Barak valley of Assam. No one speaks Assamese there even though it is a part of Assam. But look at our

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<sup>37</sup> *The Scheduled Tribes And Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006* (No 2 of 2007), India, dated 29<sup>th</sup> December, 2006.

valley so many Bengali and Hindi speakers”. This assertion of ‘our’ as Brahmaputra valley significantly comparing itself with the Barak valley of Assam as a Bengali dominated valley thus, limits the understanding of the nature of Assamese identity the people preach, as something related and sacred to the language and culture of the Assamese people. Saikia’s ultra nationalist sentiment for Assamese identity similarly can be felt among the other people of Doyang and Tengani also. At times Saikia showered praises on the government of Meghalaya and Nagaland who were formed with NDA alliances because they openly defied CAA and said that they won’t bring CAA to their states. “Actually our people are very *lubhia* (greedy). You put 100 rupees in their pocket they will sell their motherland. You just have to lure them with some *mod* (wine) and *bhang* (cannabis)”, Saikia told.<sup>38</sup> Their criticizing the government and showing complete distrust and disregard for the other people, especially the Bengalis in front of me was only because I come from a caste which was acceptable and recognized as a proper Assamese, whom they can trust. Exclusive Assamese identity was something paramount in their ideas and beliefs, which was kept high and formed the basis of the struggle. The very distinction between an ‘Axomia’ (an Assamese) and Axom Baxi Raij (residents of Assam) seems palpable here, because what the people of Doyang and Tengani has been assertive of, are the ‘due rights’ of an Axomia and not the residents of Assam.

At the same time, the people of Doyang and Tengani had deep love and respect for the ‘Assamese culture’. The regional sentiments of the people of Doyang and Tengani can be further reflected in their love for Bhupen Hazarika, Jyotiprasad Agarwalla and the prominent regional icons of Assam. In the published book of poems by Khagen Das, it boasts of Hazarika saying “Assam is proud of Bhupen Da” and exclusively pens one of the poems as “Our Bhupen Da”. The poem goes on describing the heights Bhupen Hazarika achieved during his lifetime and then finally concluding that there can be no other greater than Hazarika in Assam. This poem asserts not only Bhupen Hazarika’s greatness but also the sentiments attached because of being a fellow Assamese. Similarly Jyotiprasad Agarwalla was also cited as another great artist of Assam who added glory and pride to the Assamese culture. The regional sentiment for a fellow Assamese was expressed in a strong way. A good number of poems in the book by Khagen Das were on the CAB which caused great havoc among the Assamese.

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<sup>38</sup> The entire conversation took place at Janmoni Saikia’s house at Tengani on 02.01.2021.

So the nature of the Assamese identity that the people of Doyang and Tengani are foregrounding is something that is inherent in them- of belonging to the land, the language, culture, tradition and sentiment. This idea of belongingness was related to belonging to a particular language, culture, tradition, folklore and the like which pertained to a definite and defined territory and for them the native and the indigenous are the rightful heirs of this land. For the people, KMSS is an organisation of every poor in Assam. The strong assertion of the peasant grievances as something which must be addressed because of being an Assamese within the territorial boundaries finds expression among the people of Doyang and Tengani. And therefore, KMSS is hailed not only as a peasant organisation but also perceived as a regional organisation of Assam where to address one issue, the other is intimately related. The strong linkage of the Assamese identity and the peasant issues is the basis of their claim for forest lands. Nativism has been a strong ideology of the people of Doyang and Tengani which was paramount in its beliefs and campaigns.

## **II. The mobilising peasantry of KMSS**

Over the years, KMSS has organised itself along class, community, religion and gender lines. KMSS has been active in mobilising people against the capitalist state, forces of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation and the related development that accompany it. The wide base of the organisation requires a study of three dimensions which reflects the identity, character and composition of the participants of KMSS in its numerous protests, rallies, movements and dharnas. KMSS has been working on varied social, cultural, political, economic issues of Assam since its inception. During the massive eviction drive by the forest department of Assam, the forest dwellers of Doyang and Tengani were mobilised by Akhil Gogoi, Bhaben Handique, Soneswar Narah, Bhasco De Saikia and Manoj Tamuly, who took the lead and organised the faceless peasants. The peasantry under the aegis of KMSS has been mobilised on grounds of displacement and land rights of the same. The constitution declares that, “the basic necessities of a person are food, clothing and shelter. The peasants

and the workers provide us with these basic necessities of life.”<sup>39</sup> With the ideology of working among the peasants and the workers in Assam, it has built a mass organisation which is representative of diverse issues and goals which is not only peasant/worker centric.

From Doyang and Tengani, KMSS gradually established its presence throughout Assam, significantly in the Brahmaputra valley and a bit to the Barak valley of the region. Located in the southern region, Barak Valley with a predominantly Bengali speaking population is socio-politically and demographically different from the Brahmaputra valley. Most of the identity movements and movements of self determination of the Assamese have mostly been in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, which is native to the Assamese speaking people. The cultural and literary organisations which played an active role in the Assam Movement were fighting for the larger cause of the ethnic Assamese and the insecurity that has been posed to the Assamese speaking community. Thus, most of the regional organisations which have their dominant presence in the Brahmaputra valley, was absent in the Barak valley. KMSS has spread its roots in all the three districts of Barak Valley and have established its branch offices there as well.<sup>40</sup> The universal approach of KMSS is in tune with the ideology of *Bishnu Prasad Rabha* who in his relentless campaign in the hills and the plains of Assam united the peasants, tea garden labourers, Hindi speaking labourers in refineries and coal mines, the people of Nepal regardless of caste, creed, and language.<sup>41</sup> More recently, SMSS has also been contesting students body election in the valley against the National Students Union of India (NSUI) and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), which have strongholds in the region.

It has been discussed that the peasantry has been mobilised on issues pertaining to their existence, survival and security. This has given not only a distinct class character of the peasants, who mobilise and resist owing to their deploring economic condition, but also on the grounds, keeping into account the protection of their identity, culture, tradition of larger Assam. Of the many issues that KMSS has mobilised the public, the vast majority are the landless labourers and peasants. The protests sites represented a wide range of public starting

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<sup>39</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> The three districts of the Barak valley are Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj.

<sup>41</sup> See Majumdar, K. (2014). *Mur Dristit Bishnu Prasad Rabha*. In Hiren Gohain. *Xoinik Xilpi Bishnu Rabha*. (pp. 16-19). Guwahati: Journal Emporium.

from the indigenous community to the youth and students. There have been mobilisations by peasants, workers, women, students, youth, petty traders, tea garden labourers, the unemployed and many more. The people, as mobilised by KMSS, thus are not a homogenous entity. It is a mixture of a divergent social and economic character. It has been cross-sectional in respect of the Assamese society. This secular identity that KMSS has developed in the course through its struggle is because of the multiplicity of issues that addresses the concern of the region's diverse people. On October 12, 2018, there was a large gathering of men, women and youths called by KMSS against the increasing price rise of essential commodities and items on the busy streets of Panbazar, leading to the District Commissioner's office in Guwahati.<sup>42</sup> This call by KMSS was attended by poor peasants of nearby rural areas surrounding Guwahati who were affected by the sudden increase of price rise of essential items. A large number of landless people of Guwahati joined KMSS in 2013, when there were large scale eviction drives in the city who has been residing in the hilly areas.<sup>43</sup> In its large campaigns for saving the indigenous silk industry of Sualkuchi in March 2013, facing steep competition from Chinese markets, there were large supports from the people of Sualkuchi weavers, all of them were poor and middle class weavers. Its campaign against the anti-dam movement in 2010-11 showed its highest support among the poor peasants of Assam who were to face massive downstream effects because of the Subansiri Dam project. The vast support base among the poor has been strengthening over the years, with a large number of its significant youth population have been joining the organisation in the years.

### **Class identity-**

Class has been an enduring factor of peasant mobilisations and movements across. Scholars in India have analyzed the class patterns of peasant movements and agrarian mobilisations in India. Dipankar Gupta for instance have classified two different kinds of farmer movements in contemporary India, viz. the movement by poor peasants and agricultural labourers for higher wages and better working conditions and the other by the

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<sup>42</sup> My field work on October 12, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> This movement for land rights for the people residing in the hill areas of Guwahati took place back in 2013. I traced the participants of the movement in the Geetanagar area of Guwahati in November 2017. My interview and discussion with the people took place on 18.11.2017 and 19.11.2017.

prosperous and independent cultivators.<sup>44</sup> Class has been a determining factor in Daniel Thorner's writing who classified the peasantry into *mazdoor*, *kisan* and *malik* defining *mazdoor* as the landless laborers who tilled on other people's land, *kisan* as cultivators who toil their own soil with their own hands and *maliks* as landlords who employ the labourers.<sup>45</sup> The peasant study has been a class study throughout, and its class analysis has been the basis for its study. SinghaRoy notes, "The Left movements, especially the radical ones, have played a crucial role both in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh in demolishing the primordial structure of subordination and inculcating a secular identity for the peasantry i.e the class identity."<sup>46</sup> The struggle of the landless labourers, sharecroppers and the toilers in the agrarian society of India depicts the classist nature in the study of the peasantry over the years. Mridula Mukherjee states that the peasantry is the 'oldest class' in the world, which provided the basis for the emergence of the kings, the nobles and the feudal lords, the merchants and the traders.<sup>47</sup> Class both as a character and an identity has been largely responsible and an enduring factor in the rise of the peasant unrest and mobilisation throughout.

KMSS has mobilised the poor, landless peasants, sharecroppers, adhiars in its struggle. Mobilisations by peasants are largely on distinct economic issues, their legitimacy gains ground by their continuous levels of economic subordination and exploitation. KMSS's manifesto and constitution aims to cater to the worker and the peasants, the main provider of food, clothing and shelter to all. The organisation came into being by mobilising the landless peasants of Doyang and Tengani. Over the years, KMSS has catered the poor peasants and workers of Assam. Land reforms, land rights, price rise, rampant corruption in Public

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<sup>44</sup> See Gupta, D. *Farmer Movements in Contemporary India*. In Shah, G. (2002). *Social Movements and the State*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 193-229.

<sup>45</sup> Maliks for Thorner are those landed proprietors who derive their income by employing tenants or labourers; the *kisans* who primarily earn their livelihood by toiling on their own lands and the *mazdoors* who live primarily from working on other people's land. See Patnaik, U. (1986). *The Agrarian Question and the Development of Capitalism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Singharoy, K. D. (2004). *Peasant's Movement in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilisation and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 200.

<sup>47</sup> Mukherjee argues the peasantry is the oldest class and all other social classes are at least a few centuries younger than the peasantry, the industrial working class almost an infant in comparison to the peasantry. See Mukherjee, M. (2004). *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 16.

Distribution System, flood erosion and devastation, minimum wages, secured income are distinct issues which pertain to a certain section of the society. Studies on peasant movements and mobilisations have shown that the peasantry was mainly studied on the basis of class exploitation. The size of agricultural landholdings has been used as a variable to determine the agrarian classes. Akhil Gogoi said that out of the total peasantry in Assam, 28 percent are landless, 36 percent are ruined through floods and other natural calamities and 26 percent are manual agricultural labourers. Gogoi further adds that out of every 100 peasants, 90 of them are poor.<sup>48</sup>

The poor, landless, devastated, adhiars, agricultural labourers form the bulk of KMSS. KMSS has staged protest demonstrations with a majority of poor and landless peasants. On 6<sup>th</sup> July 2018, it staged a protest dharna against the inhuman behavior on a worker by Mukesh Hyundai in Guwahati.<sup>49</sup> On 22<sup>nd</sup> of October, 2018 it staged protest against OLA and UBER for harassing 15000 youths of Assam who are engaged in the companies.<sup>50</sup> When more than 100 tea garden workers died in 2019 as a result of consuming toxic illicit country liquor, KMSS had organised mass rallies throughout the region taking adequate measures for the wellbeing of the workers. Its demands for adequate and fair wages to the tea garden workers along with land rights, proper healthcare facilities, Scheduled Tribe status for the workers encompasses KMSS's ambit. A class nexus has been formed as a result of the effort of the organisation to cater to specific issues of the poor and oppressed class of the society. Organizing the landless, tea garden labourers, workers, KMSS has built an organisation that addresses the issues of the poor and the downtrodden.

Apart from the poor and the landless, KMSS has been organizing the middle class section of the Assamese society.<sup>51</sup> G. S. Bhalla has maintained that a successful peasant revolution is only possible when there is an alliance between landless labourers and large sections of marginal and small peasants and middle peasants and since there hasn't been any strong alliance among them till now in India, there has been a total absence of a strong

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<sup>48</sup> See Gogoi, A. (2014). *Gana Sangramar Dinlipi*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 80.

<sup>49</sup> My field work on July 6, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> My field work on October 22, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 5.

peasant movement.<sup>52</sup> During 1947 in China, Mao Tse-Tung, in the midst of the land reform movement directed his cadres to satisfy the needs and demands of the poor and peasants and agricultural workers. It also directed them to unite with the middle peasants and to protect their interests. This strategy of adhering to poor peasants/agricultural workers and to the middle peasants was central to the Communist led revolution.<sup>53</sup> Analyzing Mao's tactics to include the middle peasants in the revolutionary struggle, Huang notes, "The rural social revolution must have a strategy of relying on poor peasants for the main source of revolutionary activism against the landlords, while at the same time taking care not to attack the interests of the middle peasant, but to involve them in the social revolution. When necessary, the middle peasants could also be relied on to moderate and stabilize the mass movement."<sup>54</sup>

KMSS, though claims to be for the poor and devastated peasants, thus attempts to bring the middle class into its fold by claiming it to be in tune with the regional sentiments, aiming to work for the people and the environment by cooperating with the non-governmental organisations, environment related organisations etc. On its decision to come up with a new political party in Assam to contest in the 2016 Assembly elections, Akhil Gogoi said, "The political party from KMSS will fight for the farmers, labourers and middle class- in short the exploited class of our society and for the basic facilities they need. We will start a new politics, a new struggle".<sup>55</sup> For Gogoi, it is the poor and the middle who are most affected by globalisation. It aims to operate closely with the 'real progressive regional' organisations and the left organisations. The struggle against corruption, foreigners issue, CAB/CAA, anti-dam movement, malfunctioning of the government departments, struggle for land rights, proper irrigation facilities to the fields, development of the primary industries and sectors etc depicts the way it is working for the poor and the landless as well as the middle class section of the Assamese society. In one of its memorandums to the Director General of Police of Assam, it

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<sup>52</sup> Bhalla is also talking of an alliance with the working class also and any meaningful peasant movement must take the changed relations of production like land reforms, changing technology etc of Indian agriculture that has undergone since independence See Bhalla, G. S. (1983). Peasant Movement and Agrarian Change in India. *Social Scientist*, 11 (8), 39-57.

<sup>53</sup> Huang, P. (1975). Mao Tse-Tung and the Middle Peasants, 1925-28. *Modern China*, 1 (3), 271-296.

<sup>54</sup> Huang, P. (1975). Mao Tse-Tung and the Middle Peasants, 1925-28. *Modern China*, 1 (3), 271-296.

<sup>55</sup> PTI, (2015, March 18). *Akhil Gogoi's KMSS to float new political party to fight polls*. The Economic Times. Accessed from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/akhil-gogois-kmss-to-float-new-political-party-to-fight-polls/articleshow/46607907.cms> on 30.04.2019.



stated, “we, on behalf of all the indigenous people and all the poor and middle class people of Assam, would like to draw your attention to...”<sup>56</sup> In many of its agendas, development programmes, memorandums to the government, KMSS, has involved the indigenous groups, poor and the landless and also the middle class section of Assam. Justifying the inclusion of the middle class in its struggle, Akhil Gogoi in one of the interviews, was saying, “The global imperialist war has reached such a pinnacle that a fight which takes along only the hill and the marginal people, tribal people and the proletariat cannot be successful. Participation of the middle class in the worldwide revolution has become a serious philosophical question. Imminent collapse of the Maoist movement has become clear as they have not paid adequate attention to such issues.”<sup>57</sup> Its support for the middle class section of the society can be witnessed on its engagement on distinct issues like regularization of salaries of TET teacher employees, permanent appointment of the contractual teachers in schools, bringing in transparency in Assam Public Service Commission, updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC), withdrawal of CAB/CAA, permanent solution to the problem of immigration etc. It has taken out mass rallies to scrap the decision to increase power tariff in Assam, complete closure of the toll gates<sup>58</sup> throughout Assam which largely concern the middle class section of the society.<sup>59</sup> During the initial years, KMSS have protested against incessant price rise of essential commodities of everyday use such as rice, pulses, cooking oil, vegetables, kerosene, soap which affects the poor. Gradually its struggle against price rise has also included items like petrol/diesel hike, construction materials like bricks, cement, sand etc. This middle class stand of KMSS has extended its base giving it a dual class character to the organisation. The composite class character of KMSS is constitutive of its struggle, its programmes and course of action.

While it is noteworthy that the protests against price rise of essential commodities, struggle for land rights, land reforms, adequate market price of peasant’s produce garnered huge support among the public, followed by mass rallies and dharnas; issues such as

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<sup>56</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Press reports and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2010- March 2013*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 261.

<sup>57</sup> Das, D. (2010, April 18). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Assam: A brief note and an interview with Akhil Gogoi*. Sanhati. Accessed <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/> on 23.02.2018.

<sup>58</sup> Toll gates are checkpoints on the national highways where vehicles has to pay a given amount to move further.

<sup>59</sup> Sengupta, A. (2016, August 28). *Akhil flays government on price rise*. The Telegraph. Accessed <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/north-east/akhil-flays-govt-on-price-rise/cid/1418161 on 15.12.2019>.

corruption of cash for job scam in Assam Public Service Commission, regularization of salaries TET school teachers, appointment of permanent teachers etc hardly managed to draw the crowds and these issues were raised strongly only at the regular press meets given by its leader, Akhil Gogoi. These middle class issues were also strongly expressed in its numerous memorandums from time to time. While KMSS attempted to give a dual class character to the organisation, there has been the overriding presence of the poor in the protest dharnas and the mobilisation mostly concerned the poorer section of the society.

In KMSS, the poor mainly comprises of

- a) Landless agricultural labourers
- b) small and marginal cultivators
- c) tea garden labourers
- d) urban workers
- e) artisans and craftsmen<sup>60</sup>
- f) unemployed youths

Thus, it is not only the issues of the poor which draws the significant population to the ambit of the organisation; it also retains the middle class character which enlarges the base of the organisation. While peasant identity may not always be class based, strong ethnic and regional sentiments for the region have emerged in the struggle. The middle class peasants are also mobilised also on grounds of Assam's national concerns. Class has been determining, forceful in driving the peasants towards articulating their demands and forming a new collective rhetoric. Ghanshyam Shah identifies the middle class as the class which is placed between labour and capital. According to Shah, the middle class 'neither directly owns the means of production that pumps out the surplus generated by wage labour power, nor does it by its own labour produce the surplus which has the use and exchange value'.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Artisans and craftsmen, and for that matter self employed tradesmen (shopkeeper), is the class which according to Ralph Miliband occupies a larger number of the labour and work force, and constitute the 'subordinate classes' in advanced capitalist societies, though their standard of living is higher than those of industrial working class. This class according to Miliband has been the worst affected by the development of capitalism. See Miliband, R. (1970). *The State in Capitalist Society*. London: The Gamelot Press Ltd, p. 18.

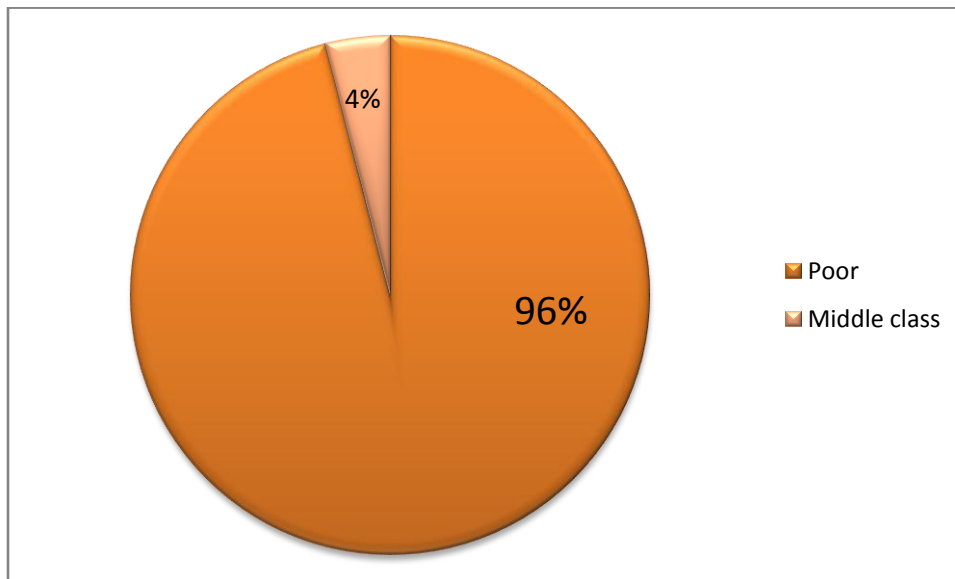
<sup>61</sup> Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 223.

Shah identifies the class as petty bourgeoisie and the white collar workers.<sup>62</sup> Ralph Miliband has aptly identified the composition of the middle class in advanced capitalist countries. While there is a large chunk of the professionals like the lawyers, accountants, middle-rank executives, technicians, scientists, architects, administrators, teachers, doctors etc, there are also people associated with the small and medium-sized enterprise, or the business class which largely form the middle class.<sup>63</sup> Miliband states that many of the classes found in advanced industrial countries can also be found in the countries of the third world but in different proportions.<sup>64</sup> The middle class of KMSS mainly comprises of

1. small tea growers
2. small business traders
3. Academicians/novelist
4. Film personalities
5. Retired professionals

The class composition of the participants of KMSS can be presented below-

**Figure 5.4: Class composition of KMSS (out of 300 participants)**



<sup>62</sup> Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, p. 223.

<sup>63</sup> Miliband also includes the cultural workmen such as the writers, journalists, critics, preachers, poets, intellectuals as belonging to the professional middle class. See Miliband, R. (1970). *The State in Capitalist Society*. London: The Gamelot Press Ltd, pp, 17-19.

<sup>64</sup> Miliband, R. (1970). *The State in Capitalist Society*. London: The Gamelot Press Ltd, p. 20.

Source: Field Survey

The overwhelming presence of the poor and the little presence of the middle class in KMSS can be explained from the fact that in Assam there has been many organisations like the AASU, ASS and the organisations which were a part of the Assam Movement caters mostly to the middle class issues of Assam.<sup>65</sup> Amalendu Guha said, “The Assam Movement, instead of uniting the toiling masses of various castes, creeds and languages in an anti-feudal, anti-monopolist struggle has divided them. It has made tea labour suspicious of the motives of the movement. It denied 20,000 organised plywood workers their basic right to work for a living. Three demands canvassed by AASU were anti-tribal.”<sup>66</sup> The Assam Movement, which has been the most successful mass movement of Assam, has often been criticized as representative of only the bourgeois and the middle class section of the Assamese society, but largely anti-feudal. The land issues of the movement largely catered to the interests of the landlords rather than the peasantry of Assam. While middle class issues were continuously raised by the civil society organisations, its demands were representative of many organisations in the region. The partially inclusive character of the Assam Movement and its major organisations made KMSS encompassing of the poor peasantry while it excluded a sizeable portion of the middle classes. Thus, the demands of the poor which were significantly addressed in the agenda of KMSS, found its place within the organisation.

### **Caste Identity**

Studies in sociology have shown that caste identities have been a major determinant in the study of agrarian relations in India. But in a vast country like India, there are not only

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<sup>65</sup> Amalendu Guha in one of his articles has pointed that the civic bodies of the Assam Movement most notably the All Assam Students Association and the Assam Sahitya Sabha represents the economic interests of the Asamiya middle class constituted of the bourgeois-landlord and petty bourgeois elements and not the toiling peasants and workers of Assam. For Guha, the Assam Movement which is also known as the anti foreigner movement was started by the Asamiya capitalist and the gentry, the students and sections of petty bourgeoisie. Later the movement also included the peasantry. The Assam Movement as argued by Guha was planned and prepared by the Asamiya bourgeoisie. Guha uses the term ‘Asamiya’ to denote the people who profess Asamiya (Assamese) as their mother tongue as different from an ‘Assamese’ which denote all the inhabitants who reside in Assam. See Guha, A. (2002). *Little Nationalism turned Chauvinist: Assam’s Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-1980*. In Shah, G. *Social Movements and the State*, (pp. 361-401). New Delhi: Sage Publications.

<sup>66</sup> Guha, A. (2002). *Little Nationalism turned Chauvinist: Assam’s Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-1980*. In Shah, G. *Social Movements and the State*, (pp. 361-401). New Delhi: Sage Publications.

regional variations but also historical and situational context.<sup>67</sup> Ethnicity plays a major role in Assam. As has already been discussed, ethnic politics have had a dominant role in driving the society, history, culture and identity of the region. The Assam Movement (1979-1985), the Bodoland movement, Karbi Movement, anti-foreigners movement demands an adequate recognition and preserving the ethnic identity of their respective communities. KMSS pledges to built a pan-Assam organisation, its membership is diverse belonging to different ethnic and indigenous communities of Assam. The constitution of KMSS states that it is an organisation which works for the organisations belonging to the indigenous community who work for the cause of land rights. Publicly it has claimed many times, that the rights of the indigenous community in terms of its identity, culture, language and land should and must be protected by the state.<sup>68</sup> Its strong stand on the rights of the ethnic communities came during the protests against the CAB. Over the time it also urged the government to grant Schedule Tribe (ST) status to the six communities of Assam- Koch Rajbonshi, Tai Ahom, Chutia, Matak, Moran and Tea tribes.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the peasant organisation has also repeatedly asked the state for strict implementation of clause 6 of the Assam Accord which aims at safeguarding and promoting the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of the people of Assam and speedy economic development of Assam.<sup>70</sup> The land rights movements in its initial years mobilised to a large extent the ethnic indigenous communities of Assam. The constitution of KMSS has resolved to work specifically for the native and indigenous people of Assam. In its struggle for land rights, it aims to work with the indigenous community organisations which struggle for the same. It has built a strong nexus among the indigenous and the local population of Assam though its campaign on many issues which concern them at large. Thus, KMSS has been strongly linking its pro-poor and middle class struggle with a distinct ethnic and indigenous identity or framework. The group of poor and the middle class are largely identified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST), Scheduled Caste (SC) and the Other Backward Classes (OBC). A graphic presentation of the diverse groups among the protesting crowds is presented below.

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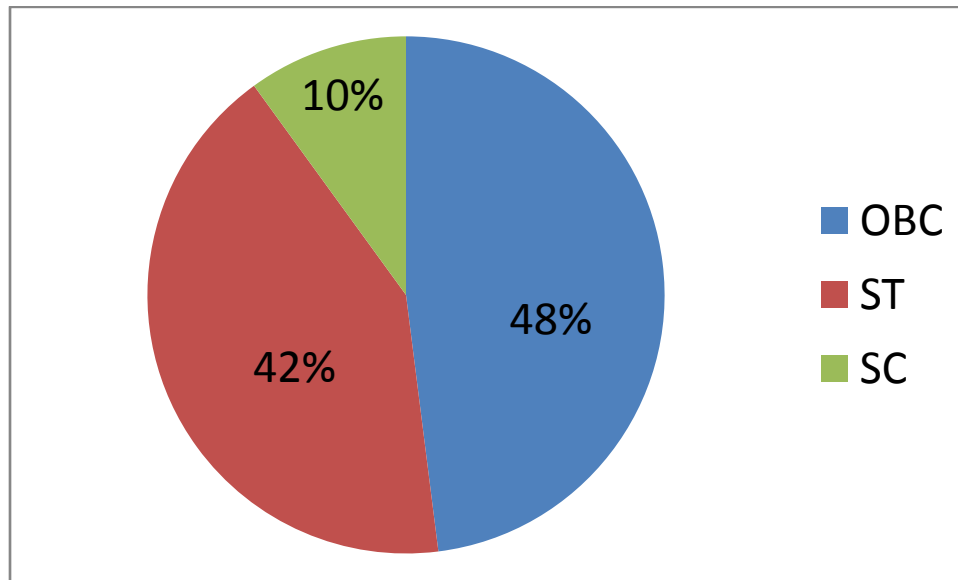
<sup>67</sup> See Vishwanath, L. S. (1990). Peasant Movements in Colonial India: An Examination of some Conceptual Frameworks. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 (2), 118-122.

<sup>68</sup> This has been said by Akhil Gogoi, on the media, on its protests demonstrations against the policies and programmes of the state.

<sup>69</sup> These communities fall under the Other Backward Class (OBC) status presently.

<sup>70</sup> Assam Accord, dated 15<sup>th</sup> August 1985.

**Figure 5.5: Caste composition of the KMSS (out of 300 participants)**

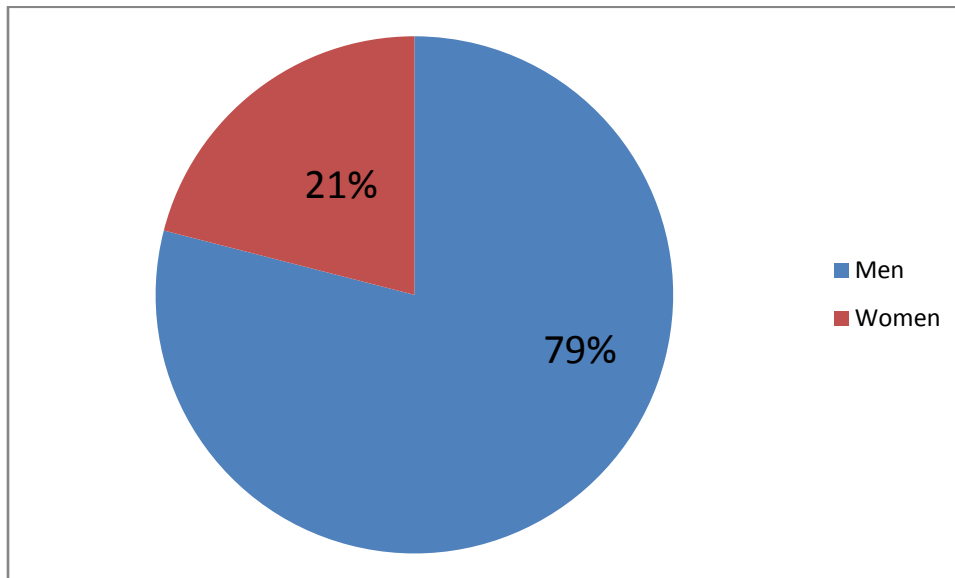


Source: Field Survey

### **Gender identity**

KMSS has established its women's wing Nari Mukti Sangram Samiti (Independent Revolutionary Organisation of Women) in 2011. In some of the major protest rallies, women were at the forefront of the struggle and represented quite a majority. The overall presence of women in the struggle of KMSS is presented below

**Figure 5.6: The gendered composition of KMSS (out of 300 participants)**



Source: Field survey

The presence of women in the protest sites is low, where there has been an overwhelming presence of men in the protest sites. There have been negligible issues specifically raised for women like improving the anganwadi services, security measures for the weavers etc. The women mostly mobilise and come out in the protest sites for issues concerning their daily life like price rise, corruption, land rights and others.

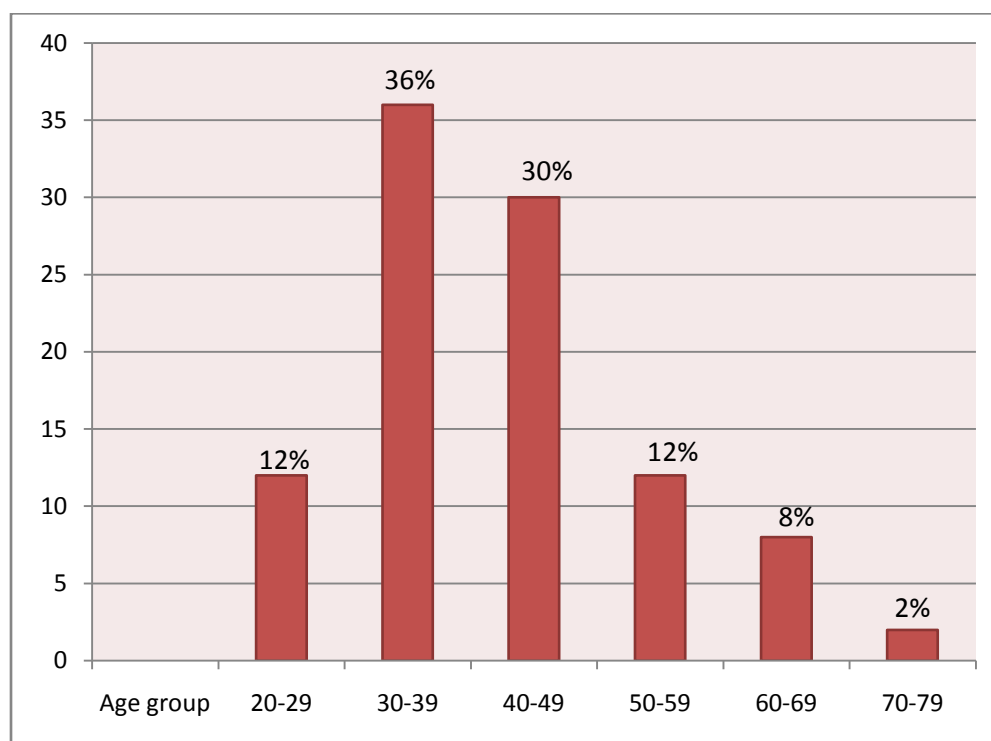
Along with the poor, landless peasants, KMSS works among the workers, women and students of Assam.<sup>71</sup> This has given a multi-character to the organisation. In an interview with News Click, Akhil Gogoi said KMSS also aims to work among the youth of the region<sup>72</sup> giving it a cross-sectional character, where it seeks to build its identity among different sections of the people, and not just confined to peasants as such. A vast majority of the people in the protest rallies are the youths. The members of SMSS are actively engaged in the activities of the organisation, campaigning and mobilising people to a large extent. There have also been many attempts by KMSS to include the youths of the country in its

<sup>71</sup> Constitution, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> Accessed from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-0of4Lrang> on 12.06.2019. Akhil Gogoi in the interview said that the youth forms the third front in a democratic country.

organisation. On January 9, 2018, Akhil Gogoi joined Jignesh Mevani's youth rally.<sup>73</sup> In an interview, Gogoi said that the 'youth will create the third alternative' to the government at power.<sup>74</sup> The youths of KMSS mostly comprised of the students, peasants and the educated unemployed. Their struggle included most of the objectives KMSS has raised.

**Figure 5.7: Age groups of the participants (out of 300 participants)**



Source: Field survey

The table reflects the strong representation of the age group 30-39 years and 40-49 years while other age groups represents below 15 percent. These groups represent the unemployed, small peasants, petty workers, artisans which appear in the forefront of every struggle. The vivid representation of people of various age groups depicts the repercussions of market driven capitalist state on all sections of the society, the young and the old, regardless of age.

<sup>73</sup> The youth rally, known as the Yuva Hunkar Rally was a rally called by the youth leaders of the country in New Delhi on January 9, 2018. Kanhaiya Kumar, Umar Khalid, Jignesh Mevani, Alpesh Thakor, Hardik Patel, Chandrasekhar Azad were the participants. It was a peaceful protests by these leaders against the BJP government, on a wide range of issues starting from educational opportunities to unemployment issues.

<sup>74</sup> Accessed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-0of4Lrang&t=397s> on 26.12.2019.



## Rural/urban identity

KMSS has mobilised people at the grassroots since its inception. The major movements of KMSS has witnessed the rural like the forest dwellers of Doyang and Tengani who were forcibly evicted by the state forest department, the villagers impacted by the downstream impacts of the mega dams in Subansiri, landless people, indigenous people etc. Gradually when KMSS extended to the city and the towns by raising collective issues of incessant price rise, corruption in Public Distribution System, implementing NREGA and other public services it has created a nexus of the rural and the urban, both impacted by the forces of globalisation. While the majority of the protestors at the protest sites were from the rural, it failed to draw adequate support from the unorganised urban sector. Diku Kalita, who works in a retail shop at Guwahati took part in KMSS's protest against the inhuman behavior meted out on a worker by Mukesh Hyundai. While Kalita was not a member of KMSS, he said he joined the protest because he was angry at the inhuman treatment where people like him regularly faced.<sup>75</sup> At a major protest rally against the OLA and UBER taxi services, KMSS joined the protestors of taxi drivers in Guwahati and demanded an increase in incentives and minimum wage for every driver.<sup>76</sup> Daniel Basumatary, a taxi driver says he was happy that KMSS has supported their cause.<sup>77</sup> Many times, the peasant organisation has supported the cause of land rights to the city hill dwellers, proper implementation of NREGA, price rise etc. While the major protests are organised at the city, there has been overwhelming presence of the rural than the urban. The support among the urban poor and workers has been weaker and unorganised.

The composition of the Rural and the Urban is presented below-

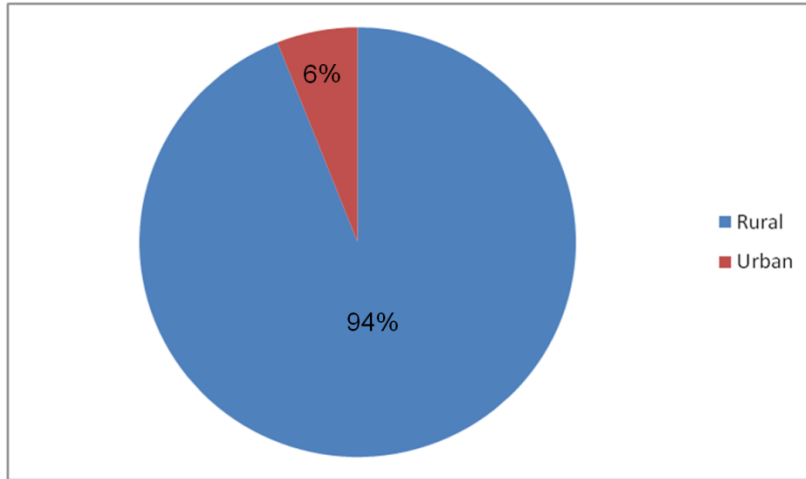
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<sup>75</sup> Diku Kalita, personal communication, July 6, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Pratidin Bureau, (2018, October 22). *Ola, Uber operators protest in Guwahati*. Pratidin Time. For more information visit <https://www.pratidintime.com/ola-uber-operators-protest-in-guwahati/>.

<sup>77</sup> Daniel Basumatary, personal communication, October 21, 2018.

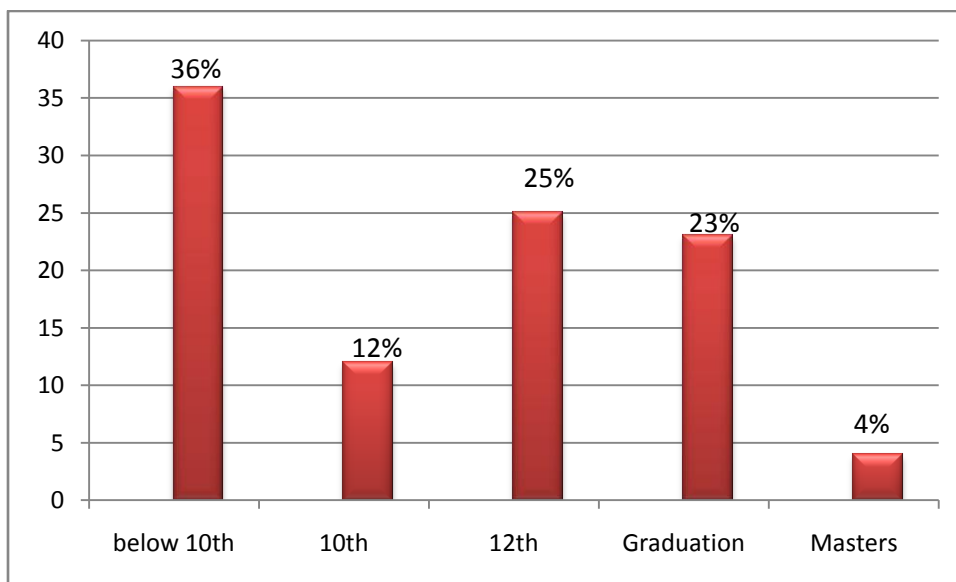
**Figure 5.8: Composition of the rural and the urban protestors of KMSS (out of 300 participants)**



Source: Field survey

Apart from the affects of the market driven capitalist state on the rural lot, the stark underrepresentation of the people from the urban areas is mainly because Assam primarily remains an agrarian economy, with 85.90 percent of its population living in the rural areas.

**Figure 5.9: Educational qualifications of the participants (out of 300 participants)**



Source: Field survey

Most of the participants of KMSS have achieved formal education with 23 percent of them being graduates. However participants who have little education occupy the highest group of participants with 36 percent. This group represents the unemployed, petty workers, skilled and semi-skilled worker and peasants.

The above illustration of the diverse composition of KMSS presents a secular identity of the peasant organisation. The data on the peasantry presents a scenario which is characterized by a seeming pattern as mobilised by KMSS with an overwhelming presence of the poor and the rural lot. However the poor and the middle class that are mobilised, actually belong to the social groups which stand at the bottom of the social hierarchy. These people are from all age groups starting from the young to the old depict the way globalisation affects everyone. It has also equally affected both men and women. The overwhelming presence of the educated youths in the protests sites gives a different image of the peasant mobilisation in the contemporary era. It not only depicts the repercussion of globalisation on all the people but also the success of KMSS in mobilising different sections of the people.

### **5.3. Voices of the Mobilising Peasantry**

While the data presented above is a general understanding of the nature of the peasantry, the accounts of the peasants from within is important to analyze and evaluate the operation of KMSS. On the protests sites the peasants have narrated their stories and the reason for coming to the protest sites. While narrating on their parts, the participants expressed their concern, over the state and its emerging nature, and on their part of being involved in the mobilisation of KMSS. The peasants identifying themselves as ‘poor’ have found their voices in KMSS. A middle-aged man, Phuleswar Dewri, a rice cultivator and a participant in one of the mobilisations of KMSS narrates his plight and distress as... *‘My condition is bad. The fields don’t suffice my family. I cannot send my children to good English medium schools. I am poor because I am a peasant. I cannot prosper because I am a peasant, not an officer or a minister.’*<sup>78</sup> The recent price rise in the essential commodities made Phuleswar Dewri come and join the protests. The statement by Phuleswar Dewri speaks out the distinct

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<sup>78</sup> Field work on October 12, 2018.

class entity peasants possess, belonging to a certain strata in a society. It presents the peasant as a poor, downtrodden and oppressed one; subdued economically and operating within this larger class nexus. The peasants, mostly from poor families have formed a class identity of their own, them largely being the oppressed. It viewed KMSS as the only organisation which addresses their concerns.

Bimola Rabha, a widow, who came from Boko (around 55 kilometers west of Guwahati); reached the protest site at 9 am in Guwahati. She is a weaver and monthly earns around 3000 rupees. With the rising price rise of the essential goods she finds it extremely difficult to manage the expenses of the house as well as the schooling of her two children. Bimola was of the opinion that KMSS stands for poor people like them and supports the organisation whole heartedly.<sup>79</sup>

Bapu Boro, a poor daily wage labourer on the fields narrates, 'I am poor and helpless. I get a mere hundreds of rupees monthly from my work. With the increase price rise and declining rate of our produce, I decided to come to the protests'.<sup>80</sup> Diku Deka, 38, a peasant of Palashbari in the Kamrup district of Assam, who tills his own 3 bigha land, finds it extremely difficult to meet ends. In one of its massive rallies against price rise of essential commodities like the LPG cylinders, in which Deka was participating says, "The government has left us with no option except to protest. It never thinks of the poor man's family".<sup>81</sup>

A large section of people who have joined the movement of KMSS are bus drivers, vegetable vendors, fishermen, boatmen, weavers, artisans, ola/uber drivers and shopkeepers, who are devoid of a regular income. For them, KMSS not only provided a platform where they voice their concerns and express discontent over the wide range of issues that they are a victim of, but also an organisation which raises important issues of the common people. With rising price rise of cooking gas, petrol, diesel and essential goods; rising corruption; the economic condition of the people have deteriorated. Their economic deprivation, notably unemployment, landlessness, low wages and daily hardship of life found place in the agendas KMSS. There was a feeling of deprivation and discontent amongst them. These people were

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<sup>79</sup> Field work on October 12, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Field work on October 12, 2018

<sup>81</sup> Field work on October 12, 2018.

not divided by different ethnic ties, rather they were a composite whole, who were united by their day to day worries and hardships of life. The people who have come from different places and backgrounds had a shared understanding of the situation, in a similar way. The people of KMSS belonged to different communities yet came together against the incessant price rise, issues of corruption, land rights, erosion of banks and cultivable lands by floods and others. Mridul Rabha, aged 39, from Gorchuk, Guwahati when asked about other reasons of joining the protests of KMSS apart from price rise, corruption, rights of peasants and workers says, “Nothing else. These are the larger issue which bother and affects us.”<sup>82</sup> The complexities of the neoliberal state, its rapid expansion of the market and its ill effects on the society and economy were hardly understood by the participants. Yet all the leaders of the organisation time and again told about the repercussion of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation in my interview with them. Phungkha Brahma, 48, says, ‘Else where will we fight and resist. Krishak Mukti is the only option. Yesterday the government increased the price of the cooking gas by 100 rupees. Only KMSS took up the issue’. People from different places have participated in the protests of KMSS because it affects their livelihood. The protest sites were filled with anger, disillusionment, fear, apprehensions about the future with little or no hope of their demands being met. They came to show their strength and their disagreement with the government on various issues. With an intention that the government will heed to their rights and demands, the peasants join the protests in large numbers particularly to voice their dissent and bring to light the inadequacies in their lives and in the society in general. Different voices came up on why they still protest. Though hopeless, the people dissent and oppose for that is the only option left for most of them.

The table below presents the response of the peasantry on their reasons for joining KMSS.

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<sup>82</sup> Field work on October 12, 2018.

**Table 5.1: Reasons for joining KMSS’s protests (out of 300 participants)**

<b>REASONS</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
<b>It addresses peasant/worker issues and related issues of the poor</b>	75
<b>Belief in the path of the organisation</b>	10
<b>Ideological belief</b>	2
<b>No trust on other political parties and organisation</b>	6
<b>National issues of Assam</b>	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	100

Source: Field survey

The peasantry has put out many different reasons for joining KMSS where seventy five (75) percent of the participants addressed that the organisation have always stood for their issues and fought for their rights which ranges from land rights, forest rights to issues of price rise and corruption. This indicates most of the mobilisation is due to the rising deterioration of economic condition and economic insecurity of the peasantry. A mere two (2) percent are ideologically inclined towards the peasant organisation and ten (10) percent of the participants believes the path KMSS has taken over the years. This population more or less has faith in the ideological path of the organisation and the way it is orienting towards socio-economic and political issues of the region. With KMSS giving equal importance to the national issues of Assam, it has only been able to draw only a mere seven (7) percent of its population. National issues of Assam do not find a good place among the issues of the masses, where they are more concerned with economic securities. The majority of the population joins the protests because of the organisation’s engagement over concerns of the peasant’s/workers more prominently the vulnerable section of the rural economy. KMSS has been centering its work and agendas for the ethnic Assamese. Akhil Gogoi said in an interview, “Assamese nationalism is ethnic Assamese nationalism”.<sup>83</sup> The indigeneity and ethnicity of the Assamese with its local folklore and traditions was placed at the foremost in its struggle as has been discussed in chapter four. The ethnic Assamese mobilised under KMSS does represent a majority of its population but they do not mobilise because of their upliftment and development of their community but on the basis of their economic plight. A

<sup>83</sup> Accessed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yqZvLjoHGo> on 16.06.2020.

reason for the organisation's inability to mobilise the indigenous people on community development lines for there already exist a number of developmental organisations which work for their cause with many strong provisions in the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. They are driven not because of 'identity threat' but because of threat to their economic condition.

The active involvement of KMSS in the core regional issues of Assam holds its validation as an organisation which is culturally rooted and consonant with the local mainstream tradition of Assam. However the regional issues which it has engaged with haven't witnessed mass mobilisation. Most of it was in the form of a dialogue, press conferences, memorandums to the authorities, written articles and books, ideas expressed which it vows to work with. Of the many days observed by KMSS like the Artists Day commemorating Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, Peasant's martyr Day, International Women's Day, May Day; the days are generally observed in the office premises of KMSS with a thin crowd present in the occasion, almost all of them being office members. The mobilisation of the masses and the peasants were made on matters like price rise, corruption, repercussions of big dams, land rights, CAA, CAB- which directly affected on the lives of the people. So far, there has been no cultural mobilisation of the people like on the Artists Day or the Bishnu Rabha Diwas, other than lighting a lamp at its office premises. KMSS have tried to give a cultural angle to the 'historic Sualkuchi uprising' when indigenous weavers of Assam silk faced tremendous challenges in the market because of the Chinese silk. Though there was an intense effort of the KMSS to give a cultural angle to the movement/mobilisation, it is also important to see that the weavers of Sualkuchi faced severe economic challenges because of the coming of the cheap Chinese silk in the market. The large scale mobilisations of the masses have always been primarily on economic issues. However it drew distinctively large crowd in the anti-CAA mobilisation which was more on regional grounds. But it was overshadowed by the fact that KMSS was not the only organisation involved in anti-CAA mobilisations and neither the people waited for the peasant organisation to lead the movement. The anti-CAA movement in Assam was a spontaneous and an independent movement. This anti-foreigner sentiment among the people of Assam is inherent as witnessed in its history which led to a massive upsurge, no doubt Akhil Gogoi fruitfully did manage to organise the people during the movement. The anti-CAA movement cannot be

called a KMSS movement, whilst KMSS is a part of it. It was a mass movement of Assam called by every single organisation, starting from literary associations to student organisations to indigenous groups. The KMSS has been an active part of anti-CAA movement. The people at the protest sites of anti-CAA movement where Akhil Gogoi was leading didn't identify with KMSS or Akhil Gogoi. The anti-foreigner sentiment was inherent in the public and not something instilled or implanted. The talk of the ideology was never discussed in the protests sites of KMSS. It was on television interview, newspaper interview or in its writings that KMSS openly expressed the same. The many times Akhil Gogoi talked of its ideology was during his interviews. In an interview with Sanhati, an online journal of West Bengal, Akhil Gogoi clarified his political ideology of Marxism which is not a revisionist form but a creative ideology borrowed heavily from the tradition, folklore, people's culture and progressivism.<sup>84</sup> The talk of socialism and his anger against capitalism was more hardly expressed in the media and in Akhil Gogoi's writings. During the land rights movement in Doyang and Tengani, people recalled the speeches Akhil Gogoi, Soneshwar Narah, Bhasco D Saikia who talked the importance of effective and large mobilisation. Bhitali Das of Suratani Gaon of Tengani narrates, "Akhil Dangoriya (Dangoriya means sir in Assamese), Soneshwar Narah and others told us to mobilise in large numbers. The first thing Akhil *Da* (*Da* is elder brother in Assamese language) told was that people need to come on a single platform and continue the movement".<sup>85</sup> Thus the ideology has come out as a clarification on sets of interview. It was never expressed openly among the protesting crowd. I remember in one of the mobilisation where Akhil Gogoi was addressing the crowd in Guwahati. Gogoi was telling, "This government has killed us all. The way they have increased the price of all commodities is sad. The Sarbananda Sonowal government has sold everything to the rich non-Assamese people from Gujarat. Now they have brought the CAA. They have cheated on the Assamese people in every possible way".<sup>86</sup> Gogoi's speech while addressing the crowd was directed against the government and less on its structural

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<sup>84</sup> Das, D. (2010, April 18). *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, Assam: A brief note and an interview with Akhil Gogoi*. Sanhati. Accessed <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/2274/> on 23.02.2018.

<sup>85</sup> Bhitali Das, personal communication, January 2, 2021.

<sup>86</sup> I was present at the protesting site that took place in the lane between Cotton University and the District Commissioner's office of Kamrup Metropolitan district on 12<sup>th</sup> of October, 2018.



complexities. The invoking of the Assamese sentiment in every speech was present but this became stronger ever since the controversial CAB was tabled in the parliament in 2016.

Thus it can be seen that the national pursuit of KMSS has been distinct ideas which it clings to. However most of it remained in the form of ideas expressed.

The peasantry came to mobilise to meet their immediate needs and KMSS has been largely organizing the masses on these lines. Amidst their concerns of their economic plight, the masses were unable to comprehend the complexities of the capitalist and the neo-liberal state. Fozrul Ali, 29, a daily wage labourer in Guwahati said, “I am here because I am poor and can’t afford the rising expenses. I have three sons back in my village along with my wife and mother. I earn 500 rupees a day and with that I also have to pay 1000 rupees in house rent in Guwahati.”<sup>87</sup> The people from remote regions were vigilant that the government is responsible for the incessant price hike, corruption, and unemployment but unable to understand the reason behind such motives. Runu Chetri, 39, when confronted with this question says, “The *Mantris* want to become rich at our expense.”<sup>88</sup> Thus, though the peasants are fighting a tough battle to overcome their economic plights, KMSS has not been able to educate the masses on the complexities of the capitalist state and globalizing world. The absence of ideological awareness or concern among the participants can be elaborated in the following table which shows the peasant’s explanation of their economic plight.

**Table 5.2: Reasons of economic plight according to the peasants (out of 300 participants)**

<b>REASONS</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
<b>State policies</b>	43
<b>No adequate steps taken for the poor by the Government</b>	54
<b>Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation</b>	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	100

Source: Field Survey

<sup>87</sup> Field work on October 12, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> The entire discussion with Ali and Chetri took place in a protest site of Guwahati on 12<sup>th</sup> October, 2018.

The reasons for the economic plight as given by the peasants are not diverse. While the majority of the people blame the state policies and the government for their distress and the deteriorating economic condition, only three (3) percent of the total participants do understand the hazardous impact of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation on the overall life of the peasants. The peasantry firmly believed that the government and the policies of the state have led to the economic crisis. At the protest sites the people were targeting the government for the crisis. To comprehend from this analysis, it is evident that though KMSS has been able to mobilise the peasantry on common grounds of economic plight and distress, it has failed significantly to translate the subjective realities or to educate the masses. There is a wide gulf which exists in the socialist project of KMSS.

The peasant community, has been united because all of them have been victims of exploitation. There is a class consciousness that is present among the peasants. They know their position in the economic hierarchy, and an increasing realization of the deteriorating economic condition due to price rise, annual floods, corruption and the multiple state projects of which they have been affected. There is an aspiration among them to improve their condition though they are hardly able to understand the structural conditions that have resulted to their current situation. KMSS has succeeded in mobilising the peasants on class lines, but failed to transform the objective causes to subjective consciousness. Their agonies and hardships only remained in economic poverty and suffering and not the complexities of a capitalist state. KMSS has mobilised the masses on sudden economic distress and but has not been able to translate the larger repercussions of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation against which the organisation centers its struggle although it has stated in its constitution that one of the main duties of the members of the organisation is to educate the masses.<sup>89</sup> KMSS has been able to mobilise the masses against the government. It has successfully been able to connect with the masses but failed to understand and organise them on the basis of its principles and agendas.

#### **5.4. Main points of analysis**

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<sup>89</sup> Constitution, Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti.

The data presented and the report of the peasantry presents a vivid picture of the participants, its heterogeneity and the divergent interest of the peasantry. Three concluding points can be put forward as major derivations from the discussion above-

1. The peasantry is dispersed along a multiplicity of identities- caste, class, gender, age groups, community and the like. The dynamicity of the peasantry can be observed in this specific trait. KMSS has been successful in building a unified peasant identity cutting across the diverse identities for often traditional peasant movements have mobilised the landless and agricultural labourers which pertains to a specific section of a definite age group, gender and class. Globalisation and market driven state has proved fatal for the people which affects everyone. Even the educated youths presents a good number on the protests sites. There are scholars who argue that the 'new farmer's movement' primarily reflect the interests of the rich farmers and hardly carried out by the poor and petty farmers whereas there are scholars who are of the view that the movement primarily has its support among the poorer sections of the society, not forgetting the middle class peasantry.<sup>90</sup> The contemporary peasant mobilisation in the era of globalisation has witnessed large sections of the poor alongwith some presence of the middle classes. The multi character of the KMSS is a noteworthy feature in the neo-liberal world.
2. However, the heterogeneous peasantry is united only by a single thread- economic plight and distress. The worsening of the material condition of the peasantry is what leads them to mobilise against the government. For them, the deterioration of their economic conditions is because of the acts and policies of the government. The mobilisation of the entire peasantry is centered against the acts and decisions of the government per se.
3. KMSS has not been able to convert the subjective concerns into objective consciousness. Apart from its leaders and prime members of the organisation, people are not able to trace the repercussions of globalisation and the capitalist state on the rural and agrarian life. While they blame the government for their plight, they are

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<sup>90</sup> Many scholars like Dhangare, Banaji, Assadi are talking of the rich peasant organisations which lead the farmers movement. Brass, T. (2008). The New Farmers Movement in India. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 21 (3-4), 3-26.

unable to comprehend the complexities of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation in a capitalist state. KMSS has failed to organise the public against the 'capitalist system' which the organisation has vowed to work for.

## **Conclusion**

While taking into account two different sets of the peasantry- one who are structurally a part of KMSS and the ordinary participants of the mobilisation led by KMSS, it appears that though they had their own sets of economic struggle, the latter came to the protest sites only with the hope to solve their daily economic struggle. The former were supportive of KMSS's struggle and its politics which it has been evolving over the years. Their faith in the organisation was unchallenging which emerged because of its trust on the popular leader, Akhil Gogoi.

The agrarian scenario of Assam depicts that the majority of the poor who belong to the socially deprived castes are the worst sufferers in a neo-liberal state. This explains that the economically and socially marginalized peasants have been at the forefront of every struggle of KMSS. The mobilisation of the poor is organised by the rural educated youth who are representative of KMSS. Peasant identity in the due course has largely been formed because of the deteriorating economic conditions and class consciousness among the masses. However the people of Doyang and Tengani have identified themselves as an "Assamese peasant" in their struggle for land rights. The claims of land rights are made by them solely on being an Assamese in Assam. Though KMSS attempted at mobilising the masses along broader lines of ethnicity, community, caste and regional lines, peasant identity is self formed and cannot be constructed on mere grounds when peasants are victims of economic exploitation and poverty.

KMSS in the due process of its building up and in the course of their struggle makes us understand 'peasant' as an emerging category struggling for its own existence and survival. The neo-liberal era has made the peasant more vulnerable, swayed heavily by successive market policies of the state. The economic factor united the peasants who have mostly been affected by unstable income, decreasing prices of the crops, land insecurity, increasing price rise, forced evictions and the like. This universal secular identity was materialized by the

economic conditions and sufferings of the peasants. Ethnic identity and assertions have long dominated the entire identity debate in Assam. Where it has been seen that the many different ethnic communities have been demanding adequate safeguards, development and representation of their identities, the people come from agrarian background and families. The economic factor has been a distinct pattern in building a common universal peasant identity in Assam.



## Conclusion

The thesis after understanding KMSS's work ponders certain questions centering the peasant in a neo-liberal world. What are the issues of the peasantry? Aren't the issues of price rise, corruption, environmental concerns the issues of the peasantry? Can issues of the tribal/indigenous people be considered as peasant issues? Aren't the rights to the forest and natural resources of the local/indigenous people the issue of the peasantry? To oversee these issues will be to comprehend the struggle of the peasantry as only feudal in the era of globalisation. While the present economic structure is not completely feudal, there exist other forms of control on agrarian capital. I argued in the thesis, that the peasant mobilisation by KMSS in the era of globalisation is hosted by a number of issues, primarily economic whilst also cultural, political and social. KMSS has addressed the manifold peasant grievances in its struggle against liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. The peasant organisation in its bid to further penetrate into the masses and the society has adopted the region in its entirety- in terms of its culture, tradition, economy, development. This regional agenda of KMSS, confined to the geographical boundaries of Assam has emerged as another significant trend of peasant politics in the neo-liberal era.

As discussed, KMSS emerged naturally from the struggle of land rights in Doyang and Tengani. The land issue still remains a major agrarian crisis in Assam. The issue of land has been contentious and has been an important resource in Assam. Assam came to be seen as a 'settlement frontier' because of fresh migration to the region in colonial Assam and also as a 'resource frontier' where land and the natural resource of Assam was seen as sources of extraction by the colonial rulers.<sup>1</sup> The question of land rights and rights to the forests eventually laid the road for the peasant organisation to surface. The questions of adequate wages, rights over forest land, indigenous people's rights and claim over resources, fair prices for the produce of the peasants, annual floods, price rise, issues of corruption in the government departments, panchayats and programmes of rural development are more or less

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<sup>1</sup> Baruah, S. (2020). *In The Name of the Nation*. California: Stanford University Press.

the common issues and demands of the rural proletariat was raised by KMSS. The negative impact of state-led development has made the rural poor impoverished, where the fight against poverty and inequality is where KMSS struggled. It has contended that all forms of exploitation are a result of the state and the capital expropriating the rural and the agrarian society. While KMSS played its role in giving a platform to the faceless peasants, it was the spontaneous upsurge of the forest dwellers that became the prime face of the movement and carried forward the struggle. In the course of its struggle, the organisation came to realize that rural and agrarian issues are issues of the youth, workers, local artisans, women, tea garden labourers and other sections of the society.

The modus operandi of KMSS, largely its politics have been a different pattern of asserting its demands in a capitalist state governed by democracy. The government, administration, the military and the police, the sub-central government and the parliamentary assemblies are the institutions of the state<sup>2</sup> that the struggle of KMSS has been centered on. These agencies of the state have come down heavy on KMSS. The protests, struggle, resistance, dissent, movements have come into a violent conflict with the state. This signifies a particular trend of the usual peasant politics as has been witnessed in history where the repressive role of the state becomes apparent. In contrast to this, there is another significant trend of contemporary peasant mobilisation as witnessed in KMSS. The peasant organisation has adopted nationalist causes pertaining to the region of Assam, ranging from socio-political, cultural and economic issues. Antonio Gramsci who opined that the cultural factors of the society like folklore, popular culture which is a bourgeoisie domain of exercising hegemony in a society, seems to be contested by KMSS. The penetration into these sectors of the society signifies a different politics as an initial breakthrough on the part of KMSS. These sectors of the society generate consensus in a capitalist state, which KMSS has engaged with. Apart from the cultural factors, the national politics of KMSS has involved steps towards the upliftment of the people of Assam and its composite culture through a larger federal framework and economic independence. Both the two trends signify two different aspects of

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Miliband gives a thorough understanding of the capitalist state and broadly the institutions which make up the state. Miliband opines that a government should not be confused up with a state because it is generally assumed that the governmental power is equivalent to the state power and hence in one of his chapters, Miliband gives a broad understanding of the state system. See Miliband, R. (1970). *The State in Capitalist Society*. London: The Gamelot Press Ltd, pp. 49-67.



contemporary peasant politics in the era of globalisation- one, which always comes in direct confrontation with the state and is largely politically motivated and the other which involves engaging into the developmental aspects of rural and agrarian life of Assam embedded in the local culture and tradition.

KMSS actually progressed through the dialectical course- it began with the land rights, later engaged in many other grave issues like corruption, globalisation, inefficiency of the government departments, capitalist nature of the state, better living and economic conditions for the people, each time having embarked on a new reality of human society. It came to identify that peasant issues to larger socio, economic, political and cultural issues related with unemployment, price rise, corruption, fee hike, environmental and the like. It developed through a course of dialectics, from peasant-centric issues to its national commitment embedded with notions of territoriality and distinct Assamese identity. In an era driven by market politics, issues which have become pertinent are not only the alienation of land and resources but also insecurities of income, employment, price rise, corruption, environmental degradation and identity crisis. Thereby, from starting with land rights issues it has addressed all major concerns of Assam, starting from peasants' rights to the rights of the workers, youths, women and other groups affected by the state. While peasant struggles have been manifold like forests struggles, anti-dam struggle, environmental struggle, floods etc, issues which concern the Assamese people at large also came to acquire prominence. However, in the eventuality, KMSS has not been successful in translating the subjective issues into objective concerns; the peasantry seems to be mobilised more on their deplorable economic condition and rising economic insecurity. The peasantry is unable to comprehend the complexities of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. Some discussions on relevant issues surrounding KMSS is further clarified below.

### **Why KMSS has emerged as a potent peasant organisation?**

Amidst the operation and popularity of KMSS, it is also important to understand as to why KMSS, an independent peasant organisation with no affiliation to parliamentary political parties have emerged as the most potent force in the scenario of Assam? The answer has been thoroughly answered in the main text. But to put it more lucidly let us summarize in the following points-

Firstly, the utter negligence of the capitalist state on the plight of the peasants in Assam is one of the prime reasons for a peasant organisation to surface in the politics of the region. From time and again the issues of identity, language, ethnicity of the people gained more legitimacy and overshadowed the plight of the peasantry as a group whose survival was hindered by migration, privatisation and globalisation of the economy, corruption, construction of big dams, natural and artificial floods etc. The effect on peasants by all these were seemed secondary since the most burning issues of the state have and always been exclusively on identity and regionalism. This is also reflective on the heavy scholarship that from time to time has focused on ethnic tribal identity and regional patriotism in Assam.

Secondly, the politics of Assam has largely evolved without a viable organisation and strong opposition to challenge the state developments that over the years have affected the local people. The AGP which was formed as a result of the large scale migration from Bangladesh to champion the regionalist aspirations of the people of Assam has failed to live up to its expectation. There has been a gap in addressing the local and regional issues (apart from migration) in Assam. Udayon Misra states, “In the absence of an organised voice of opposition parties, the KMSS was filling the vacuum.”<sup>3</sup> There was a clear absence of a stable and sound opposition universal in its orientation to address the worries and demands of the peasants.

Lastly, KMSS has been squarely addressing the important issues of the poor and the weaker sections of the society in its regular campaigns and struggle. As seen, the struggle was not only delegated to land rights. It has encompassed every potent issue that has been left unaddressed. KMSS has given a formal and organised platform to the faceless peasants of Assam.

### **KMSS’s struggle against the capitalist state**

In the neo-liberal state, the struggle is of the poor. Excessive corporatization has resulted in the alienation of land and increasing economic insecurity among the people, the poor have been the worst sufferers. While the primary aim of KMSS is to resist the forces of

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<sup>3</sup> Misra, U. (2011). A New Edge to People’s Protests in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46 (28), 16-18.

liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation and the capitalist state, and centers the woes of the poor peasants and workers as existent only in the capitalist state; the peasants, workers and the vast number of rural poor seeks primary addressal of their economic woes and problems. The concerns and issues that KMSS has banked its struggle upon is not only economic in nature, but the cultural, political, social specificities of the region. Globalisation has changed the nature of struggle of peasant organisations. Contemporary peasant mobilisation, thus, includes potential issues which poses threat to the existence and survival of a peasant and the rural in all its manifestations. The ability to address environmental concerns, privatisation of major sectors, repercussions of big dams, corruptions and scams, fair market price for the produce etc reconstructs peasant struggle in the era of globalisation. This, however, does not mean that the traditional peasant issues of land rights, right to the forest land and resources do not exist. While new problems do seem to have emerged in the globalizing world, Assam being a predominantly agrarian and rural economy, conventional peasant issues still exists.

The countless struggles of KMSS against forces of globalisation and intense capitalism have questioned the nature of the state; the state being perceived as a capitalist and neo-colonial one. KMSS has shown dissatisfaction with the acts, policies and programmes of the state that has often led to a confrontation between the two. The capitalist nature of the Indian state has always been attacked because of the insecurities and distress it has caused to the lives of the peasants and the workers. This has substantially evoked large scale protests against the state. There has been a direct confrontation between the state and KMSS, the reason primarily being the capitalist nature of the state, where processes of development, had adverse affects on the lives of the peasant, workers, students and women. In the process of its struggle, KMSS has taken out mass rallies, organised protests and expressed disappointment over the plight of the Assamese people because of issues like price rise, migration, price rise, large dams construction, corruption- all a product of a capitalist state. Many number of times the leaders of KMSS have been arrested, on grounds of posing serious threat to the security of the state, disrupting law and order, or under the pretext that the leader, Akhil Gogoi “has been actively abetting/instigating/ provoking/motivating and conspiring to wage war against

the state on certain grounds”<sup>4</sup>. Its cause of regionalism, working for the people of Assam is built on the edifice of criticism of the ‘nature of the state’ and to reform this very character of the state. Assamese national consciousness has often been asserted along lines of disagreement with the state processes of development with an intent to modify the capitalist state and put in place a system which is politically federal and economically self-reliant, which also happens to be the larger objective of KMSS and later of its political party- RD. Its engagement over reviving the rural economy; advocating strong village units with larger federal powers to the states, identifying Bihu with the peasants and its numerous movements for the poor stands against the highly centralized, capital intensive neo-liberal state.

The struggle of KMSS against the capital-intensive nature of the state is paramount in its campaigns. Its politics against the capitalist nature of the Indian state can be seen not only in its struggle and protests but also in its methods of resistance vis-à-vis the high handedness of its members by the state. Its stand and take on diverse regional issues of Assam were also posited against the disorder of the capitalist state in the era of globalisation. If the loss of peasant land and its identity was linked to the causes of globalisation and migration; the cry for the upliftment and saving the local and indigenous economy was directly positioned against the repercussions of global market on the indigenous economy. Similar threads were drawn in its anti-dam movement or on the alienation of the local and indigenous culture. This way of battling liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation has been core to the politics of KMSS throughout.

The neo-liberal agenda of the state which underlines the need to expand the market with reduced public expenditure in all the sectors have caused insecurities among the population with violent repression from the state. Thus in the neo-liberal state, there was not only *deprivation* but also *oppression*. Peasant uprisings have been always directed against the authority which wields power. Within a democratic structure, this has evolved as a major contestation between the two. The neo-liberal state in its intent desire to expand trade, cross border migration, rapid capitalist development has been a limit to political democracy and participation of the masses. The control of political liberty, freedom of expression and

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<sup>4</sup> *Akhil Gogoi v The State of Assam (2020)*: Bail Application No 834/2020, Gauhati High Court Judgement dated 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2020.

political participation depicts the authoritarian nature of the Indian state. The neo-liberal state gives priority to economic freedom to trade which do not guarantee economic equality in the era of globalisation. It is an impediment to equal access to resources and equal rights over the same. Economic liberalisation and unregulated market economy has impoverished the poor peasants. The plight of the poor came to be identified with different issues prevalent in a capitalist state. Hence peasant movements and resistance of KMSS have emerged as a potent force and been a dynamic response to capitalism and globalisation.

### **The electoral battle of KMSS**

A major question remains as to whether KMSS is a peasant organisation or more of a regional organisation which caters to the regional aspirations of the people of Assam. Eric R Wolf, while citing the Russian and the Chinese revolution, notes that the peasant revolutions may not be made for the sake of the peasantry, whilst the peasantry is an even part of it.<sup>5</sup> The multidimensional agenda of KMSS has put a serious question regarding its commitment to the cause of the peasants in Assam. While the initial years of its operation was largely peasant-centric, the post CAB period starting from 2016 onwards led to its orientation as a regional organisation as well. It tried to address the national question of Assam more, fulfilling the aspirations of the middle class as well, while at the same time it was also active in the issues of the peasantry. The eviction drive of around 283 dwellings at the Amchang wildlife sanctuary, carried by the BJP government in November 2017 based on a Gauhati High Court order, ignited massive protests from KMSS.<sup>6</sup> The Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary was declared a sanctuary only in 2004 and was an eco-sensitive zone declared by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, housed thousands of people displaced by floods, river bank erosion who were from Mising tribe, Hindu Bengalis and Bengali Muslims.<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, KMSS has carried mobilisations of peasants against price rise, corruption and the like.

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<sup>5</sup> Wolf, E. R. (1966). *Peasants*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall INC.

<sup>6</sup> Karmakar, S. (2017, November 27). *Protest against eviction*. The Telegraph. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/protest-against-eviction/cid/1531547>.

<sup>7</sup> Bhaduri, T. (2019, March 22). *Amchang: How thousands were rendered homeless due to 'government apathy'*. EastMojo. Retrieved from <https://www.eastmojo.com/news/2019/03/22/amchang-how-thousands-were-rendered-homeless-due-to-govt-apathy/#bypass-sw>.

The post CAB era made KMSS more unidirectional and this led to the reorientation of the peasant organisation as more of a regional organisation. Many times, Akhil Gogoi has even claimed that it believes in progressive nationalism.<sup>8</sup> It has linked peasant issues as regional issues and Assam's larger issues. KMSS has faced flak from the civil society and other organisations that it is no longer a peasant organisation working for the peasants but has conveniently worked as a larger regional organisation of Assam to serve its own ends.<sup>9</sup> One aspect supporting this is the nature of resentment that has changed. KMSS as a peasant organisation believed in mass movement for only mass mobilisation and movement can lead to desired changes in the society. Akhil Gogoi has often warned the state of starting a 'jongi aandolan' meaning movement in a wild manner, if land rights are not granted to the people residing in the hills of Guwahati.<sup>10</sup> It believed in mass movement for meeting the rights of the people and any change in the society so much so that in 2012, it publicly denounced and detested electoral politics when some core members of the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement decided to contest elections in New Delhi.<sup>11</sup> In one of its letters to Anna Hazare and other core committee members of IAC, dated 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, 2012, Akhil Gogoi wrote,

The future of this movement cannot be simply a short cut by participating in electoral politics. This will largely alienate the people and will remain an indeed poor example for all the future people's movements.....

Also, tactically, participation in the election means strengthening the present ruling party. The support for the IAC movement came from the disgruntled sections of the society who have felt betrayed by the Congress rule. Elections is a complex process. Electoral choices are done on the basis of class, caste, ethnicity, regional, religious or nationalistic

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<sup>8</sup> It has been noted by Gogoi in many interviews.

<sup>9</sup> Personally I was asked on this by the Principal of a leading college in Guwahati, in my job interview. The question was sarcastic and was intended to poke fun at Akhil Gogoi, who according to the Principal was an opportunist.

<sup>10</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, pp. 256-257.

aspirations. We need to go to the people and politicize the issue of corruption and seek a change in the system.<sup>12</sup>

This statement by Akhil Gogoi clearly puts in forth the political ideology of KMSS, its way of resentment and fighting for the rights of the people lies not in electoral politics, but in mobilizing the masses for the common interest. The post CAA episode and the subsequent incarceration of Akhil Gogoi for one and a half years under UAPA changed the course of politics of KMSS maybe forever. For once released from all the charges and winning the legislative assembly seat from Sivasagar, Gogoi told the media that since he is an MLA, he cannot organise and participate in movements now. So, the strategy of the peasant organisation has changed its due course and adopted the parliamentary way of addressing the needs and rights of the people. This solely cannot be confused as a consequence of regionalism, but also because of the strict way of handling protestors through detention and incarceration by the state in the name of handling terror. The label for an *andolankari* or a protestor/agitator over the time has been appropriated as ‘unconstitutional’ and which is not in conformity with the state’s legal rules and practices. This way of handling of the protestors/agitator by the state by bringing in laws which seeks to punish the same is a significant trend of peasant politics in the neo-liberal era.

On December 2019 when CAB was passed in the Indian Parliament, there was a spontaneous upsurge of massive protests in Assam. Akhil Gogoi, Dhaijya Konwar, Manas Konwar and Bitu Sonowal were arrested by the Assam police over their alleged involvement in the anti-CAA protests. There were many regional organisations of Assam who came united to oppose the CAA, starting from student bodies, youth bodies to literary organisations. The students, youth, women, children, peasants, workers and almost every person were on the streets openly defying government rules and opposed the act. Students of Assam took out massive rallies and were on the forefront of the struggle. Such was the level of intensity of mass movement against the said act in Assam that the state suspended the internet connection and imposed curfew in the region for a total of 7 days. Around 26 army columns were deployed in the region to assist the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) to

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<sup>12</sup> Gogoi, A. (2013). *Selected Press Releases & Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, pp. 256-257.

handle the situation. Assam became the starting point of anti-CAA protests of the country and it was actively reported by several leading national media houses. However it was only the members of KMSS and SMSS who were arrested and charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for anti-CAA protests. While Akhil Gogoi was denied bail by the NIA court, the other members who were arrested subsequently received bail after almost eight (8) months of imprisonment. The arrest of its members has positioned KMSS different from all other regional organisations of Assam. This has clearly brought to picture the strained relation between the peasant organisation and the capitalist state, and the manner the later attempts to subjugate the former.

The trajectory of electoral politics has changed the nature of functioning of KMSS as well as its equation with other political parties of Assam. KMSS has never been on a cordial relation with the Congress and the BJP. The formative years and the mass movements led by KMSS was when the Congress was in power in Assam. It was during the Congress era of Assam, that not only KMSS was formed but also led massive protest movements, the most significant of them are the Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Power Project anti-dam movement, the India Against Corruption movement, movement for land rights, movements against price rise, corruption etc. These movements strengthened the base of KMSS as a popular peasant's and worker's organisation of Assam. With the BJP-AGP at power, post 2016 assembly elections of Assam and the tabling of the controversial CAB in the Indian parliament the same year, the resistance of KMSS against the bill was massive. The leaders of KMSS and SMSS have faced legal actions from the state and the coming of the CAA has led to bitter relation between the peasant organisation and the BJP-AGP.

The decision of KMSS to contest electoral polls in the Assam assembly elections of 2021 and its forming of a regional party- Rajjor Dal on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2020 have changed the equations with the political parties which is the newest development. While Akhil Gogoi is the sole candidate who managed to win from RD, the RD is now more active as an outfit if compared to its parent organisation-KMSS. Generally we have witnessed in history that it is the political parties which gives birth to the peasants and workers organisation to expand their base, but here it is the KMSS which have extended its political arena giving birth to a political party RD.



The electoral battle of 2021 Assembly election of Assam was hard fought on the controversial act- CAA. KMSS has brought in dynamicity into the regional site of electoral competition. Akhil Gogoi, who was jailed for his anti-CAA activities, won the Sibsagar constituency from the jail premises, defeating the BJP candidate by 11,875 votes.<sup>13</sup> With this, Gogoi became the first Assamese to win an election from the jail and the absence of physical campaigning affirmed the popularity and dynamicity of the leader. The electoral competition of KMSS and RD with other political parties of Assam was different where the campaigning of the former was just confined to the open letters of Akhil Gogoi addressed to the people of Assam. In a bid to defeat the BJP, Akhil Gogoi gave a clarion call to all the other parties in Assam to unite under an umbrella barring AIUDF which according to Gogoi is a communal party like the BJP. The Congress, whose allied partner is AIUDF in the recent elections in Assam, did not accept the proposal of Akhil Gogoi. So while the electoral competition with the BJP was on the basis of the controversial CAA and on fighting for the land and identity of the Assamese from the influx of foreigners, its equation with other political parties was never united for the same. The victory of Akhil Gogoi was not based on active campaigning and self-publicity but hugely drawn from the moral support of the people. Akhil Gogoi's popularity as a mass leader was solely related to his prolonged campaign and movements for the people and significantly his anti-CAA activism. Months before the elections, KMSS leader Bhasco De Saikia was appealing to the public for donations for RD to contest in the upcoming assembly elections. Where today's election campaigning is mostly money power, KMSS was different from other parties in the nature of contesting elections. In the absence of the supreme leader, the members of KMSS and RD went to nook and corner of Sibsagar constituency distributing leaflets and Akhil Gogoi's written letters to the people. The written word became privileged.

In most parts of rural Assam, the sympathizers of the organisation and its members has taken out successive rallies, organised *naam kirtan*, carried out campaigns and sought public funding to fight the legal battle for the release of Akhil Gogoi. While Akhil Gogoi still in prison, KMSS's General Secretary, Bhasco De Saikia in a press conference declared on

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<sup>13</sup> FP Research (2021, May 03). *Assam Assembly election 2021, Akhil Gogoi profile: Raijor Dal wins Sibsagar constituency from jail*. Firstpost. Retrieved from <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/assam-assembly-election-2021-akhil-gogoi-profile-jailed-anti-caa-activist-is-known-to-expose-corruption-through-rti-9445781.html> on 3.08.2021.

August 2020 that Akhil Gogoi would be the Chief Ministerial candidate from the proposed party. With an aim to redress the wrongs done to the people of Assam by the successive governments it will ‘work for the welfare of the tribal people and also for the development of the people belonging to all religions, cultures and languages’.<sup>14</sup> The motive behind the party is to form a ‘politically federal, an economically self reliant, culturally inclusive and temperamentally scientific Assam’.<sup>15</sup> This was at a time when the state came down heavily on KMSS and almost weakened the organisation in term of its operation.

However while announcing their new political party to fight the upcoming assembly elections in 2021, KMSS said that their party will address the national issues of Assam most importantly it will work to roll back the CAA in Assam. Bhasco De Saikia said in an interview that KMSS is a *Jatiyo Xongothon* (regional organisation) of Assam. The decision to launch a political party was sharply made to cater to the national issues of Assam. KMSS has transcended to larger notions of territoriality, where it is more bound to the ethnic space and local ties. Khagen Das, a resident of Dighali Maaj Gaon of Tengani has penned a song for Raijor Dal (People’s party), the new political party of KMSS which is presented below-

*The elections have arrived  
Embrace the new party- Raijor Dal  
Forget the old parties  
O’ my friend  
Just think who will you cast your vote  
We got many ministers, good at speeches and fake promises  
They destroyed the Assam Accord, we know  
O’ my friend  
Just think who will you cast your vote  
They brought CAA and gave the throne to the foreigners  
Raijor Dal is only our own  
O’ my friend*

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<sup>14</sup> Sentinel Digital Desk. (2020, August 22). *Assam Elections 2021: KMSS launches new political party to contest polls*. The Sentinel. Retrieved from <https://www.sentinelassam.com/north-east-india-news/assam-news/assam-elections-2021-kmss-forms-new-political-party-to-contest-polls-496699>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

*Who will you cast your vote?*

*Forget the hand, elephant and the lotus in this election.*<sup>16</sup>

Thus the revolutionary politics of KMSS has been given way to party politics. KMSS started as a movement- movement for the land rights of the people and then institutionalizes as an organisation, later becoming a part of the electoral competition. From a left based organisation, it has emerged as an ultra-nationalist organisation of Assam, later submitting itself to the electoral game of a parliamentary democracy.

### **The narrow nationalism of KMSS**

Interestingly KMSS as a pan-Assam organisation of Assam has expanded its reach in the Barak valley of Assam, which is predominantly a valley of Bengali speaking population of Assam. The Brahmaputra valley, which is the hub of Assamese speaking population and ethnic people of Assam, has always been the centre of the civil society groups of Assam, and which is where the Assam movement took place. The Axom Sahitya Sabha (the Literary Organisation of Assam), AASU are the organisations which have been operating in the Brahmaputra valley. With the complexities that arouse after the language movement and anti-foreigners movement with the Bengali speaking population, the Barak valley drives its own course of politics aloof and different from that of the Brahmaputra valley. Amidst these complexities of speaking a different language and having a different culture, KMSS have penetrated a bit into the valley. Its student faction-SMSS has also emerged as a potent student organisation in the valley.

As told to me by one of the leaders of KMSS, that KMSS has district offices in all the districts of Assam.<sup>17</sup> In its regular protests and on addressing the burning issues of Assam, it has not left the Barak valley out of its focus and have organised similar protests central to the region. In an open essay competition organised by the peasant organisation in June 2021

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<sup>16</sup> The hand, elephant and the lotus here are the symbols of the political parties- the Congress, Asom Gana Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata party. The song has been collected from Khagen Das's personal notebook during my field visits.

<sup>17</sup> It was told to me on 22.03.2018 by one of the leaders in the central office of Guwahati.

English, Assamese and Bengali were kept as the medium of writing.<sup>18</sup> In June 2014, it openly called for protests against the Tipaimukh hydroelectric project located at the confluence of Tuivai and Barak rivers in Manipur at a rally in Badarpur in Karimganj district of Barak valley of Assam.<sup>19</sup> The rally addressed the ill effects on the life, economy and environment of the region as a whole. In a memorandum, KMSS appealed to the General Manager of North East Frontier Railway for urgent completion of the Luming-Silchar meter gauge railway line to broad gauge railways for improved connectivity between the Brahmaputra and the Barak valley and to overcome the existing economic and social difficulties.<sup>20</sup> At times, Akhil Gogoi has shown his soft corner for the Bengali speaking population of the Barak valley. While on a visit to Barak valley in July of 2021 to solve border issues with Mizoram, Akhil Gogoi remarkably said, “I have huge respect and love for Bengali people”.<sup>21</sup>

In terms of the cultural distinctiveness that KMSS heavily relies and identifies on, it is said by Akhil Gogoi that KMSS’s ideology is heavily borrowed from tradition, folklore, people’s culture and progressivism then how much of Bengali culture and folklore do we see in its politics? Hardly any. There has been an underplaying of Bengali identity in the politics of KMSS and the way it has been banking on the majoritarian culture and identity of Assam on the entire region is divisive politics, not so different from the other conservative civil society organisations of Assam. Minority identity and culture have been intentionally avoided and neglected in order to keep a safe foot on the popular majoritarian culture of the Assamese. All the press releases, statements, notices and memorandums of KMSS have been made in Assamese and sometimes in English. Though it attempts to differ from other Assamese civil society organisations by addressing the needs and concerns of the Bengali people of the Barak valley, the mobilizing strategy has only been on pertinent political and economic issues of the valley and not on its culture. Furthermore before KMSS was formed,

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<sup>18</sup> The essay competition on “The dream of developing Assam as the most developed state in India” was organised in the month of June-July of 2021 by KMSS, SMSS, NMSS and SSMSS in the memory of Muktinath Guwala.

<sup>19</sup> TNN, (2014, June 26). *Akhil Gogoi calls for protests against Tipaimukh Dam*. The Times of India. Accessed from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/akhil-gogoi-calls-for-protests-against-tipaimukh-dam/articleshow/37239664.cms> on 1.8.2021.

<sup>20</sup> Gogoi, A. (2015). *Selected Press Releases and Memorandums of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti, March 2013-March 2015*. Guwahati: Akhar Prakash, p. 359.

<sup>21</sup> This was said by Akhil Gogoi on a regional news channel of Assam, maybe on the last week of July or the beginning of August on his visit to Lailapur of Barak valley. I watched the news on television.

Akhil Gogoi and the team of youths who started a cycle rally from Sadiya to Dhuburi conveniently left the Barak valley of Assam in its campaign. Following Jyotiprasad Agarwalla's ideology, KMSS has been advocating assimilation into the larger Assamese culture but this politics of assimilation is nothing but dominating bourgeoisie ideology, where the burden to assimilate falls on the minorities. The three districts of Barak valley of Assam which has 15 seats in the 126 member assembly of Assam and sends a mere of only 2 representatives to the Indian parliament have a minimal role to play in electoral politics and hence often neglected and ignored by the mainstream politics of Brahmaputra valley.

Akhil Gogoi brought to the forefront the existing land relations of the state but provided an ethno-nationalist framework within the narrow indigenous territorial structure to solve the pertinent issues which already exists in the Assamese nationalist ideas (can be seen in the Assam Accord, the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution). This has been a major setback for KMSS in a bid to win the popular Assamese sentiment which otherwise had a good start ideologically. Its non-commitment to the core left ideology and belief was evident when in 2014, Akhil Gogoi publicly supported the BJP- a right wing Hindu party in an attempt to defeat the Congress and also urged the people of Assam to vote for the BJP in the general elections of that year. KMSS also publicly supported the NRC because of the popular indigenous cry of the Assamese and opposed the CAB/CAA because of its 'anti-indigenous' nature made it no different than the pro-nationalist Assamese organisations. It never compromised with the mainstream Assamese ethno-nationalist issues and eventually made it a basis of its appeal. Whether this was done to keep a safe foot in the *jati-mati-bheti* (community-land-homestead) sentiment, its ethno-nationalist nature is detriment to the growth of the organisation as a popular and left organisation with support from all sections of the population. The NRC- a result of the pro-Assamese sentiments; was against the interests of the Miya Muslims (Bengali origin Muslims) of Char areas and Bengali Hindus of Assam that have distinct cultural and ethnic identity. It is significant that there was wide spread anti-NRC protests in the Barak valley following the NRC issue in Assam and active support in favor of CAB/CAA.<sup>22</sup> That Barak valley drives its own sentiment of politics and KMSS's

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<sup>22</sup> Agarwalla, T. (2019, December 12). *Untouched by protests, Assam's Barak valley celebrates passage of Citizenship Bill in parliament*. The Indian Express. Accessed from <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/citizenship-bill-assam-barak-valley-bengali-hindu-6162370/> on 29.07.2020.

stand on the entire issue was with the sentiments of the Brahmaputra valley and the native Assamese is clearly identifiable here. Thus, KMSS's support to the NRC and anti-CAA sentiment seeks to make the peasant organisation exclusive. The exclusive campaigning and attachment for mainstream ethno-Assamese sentiments goes against the Bengali nationalist sentiments which have its stronghold in the Barak valley. KMSS made sure that it never hurts the sentiments of the indigenous Assamese in its politics. It was done within the boundaries of the popular indigenous cry of Assam. Akhil Gogoi's idea of a 'composite Assamese culture' is exclusive and limited. The gap between the two cultures- Assamese and Bengali has been further widened, but this time it was by the so-called left based peasant organisation.

While comprehending the nature of nationalism of KMSS, one can figure its extreme nationalist sentiment for Assam and the ethnic Assamese in its program and activism over the years. Though claiming to be progressive, adhering on the lines of Jyoti-Bishnu philosophy, the nationalism has been limited and reactionary. For this blatant nationalism has come out more prominently in its regular cries specifically for ethnic Assamese. Thus, though it claims and aims to operate in the territorial boundary of Assam, it reflects the hardcore majoritarian ethnic sentiment in its politics. The left politics of KMSS was itself limited, heavily because of its reactionary nationalism.

As such the movement led by KMSS has not been a pan-Assam movement. Publicly, the peasant organisation has been urging for a composite idea of Assam- composed of all the different communities residing in the territory guided by the idea of assimilation in the larger Assamese culture. It has been advocating for the unification of all the different communities under a common Assamese culture, thereby urging for assimilation, a theory which intends to decrease differences between different groups. With this singular idea of assimilation under the larger Assamese culture has been limited, where KMSS has not been able to draw different ethnic groups to the peasant organisation. The Bodos, the Karbis, the Dimasas who have their own territorial and district councils under the 6<sup>th</sup> schedule of the Indian constitution and have their own distinct language and culture unique to them are not at all obliged or bothered by the developments or mobilisations by KMSS or to the larger idea of assimilation. The 6<sup>th</sup> schedule of the Indian constitution consists of provisions for the

administration of tribal areas in Assam which grants legislative, administrative, executive and financial powers to safeguard the rights of the tribals in the areas.

Thus, drawing from the discussions in the chapters and above points of analysis, the politics of KMSS have brought in new idioms of understanding peasant mobilisation in the society and politics of Assam. KMSS has emerged as economically self-reliant; its funding largely being derived from its own sources of cooperative peasant farming. This independence is a potent factor, whose politics is being funded from its own economy, thereby distancing itself from other political organisations and party politics, having its own independent existence. The organisation representing the voice of the masses has challenged the capitalist state time and again where the struggle of contemporary peasants lies. And as Gail Omvedt has rightly contended that the new peasant movement has organised entire village communities against the state where earlier the movement was about organizing wage-earners against the property-owning employers.<sup>23</sup> While the summary of the thesis has been cleared in the beginning, there are many important observations regarding peasant mobilisation by KMSS in contemporary Assam. One successful trait of KMSS is that it has managed to create multiple sites of power and not just include peasants and workers in its struggle against capitalism. The politics of KMSS has adapted to newer developments; it has successfully campaigned and started mass movements against the capitalist state and later becoming a part of electoral competition in parliamentary democracy. These significant developments give not only new insights to peasant politics but also describe the feature of contemporary capitalism.

The working of the established wings of KMSS- SMSS, NMSS, SSMSS are different. NMSS is currently working with 1 lakh (1, 00,000) formal membership. This organisation has not emerged as a successful working organisation of Assam, its members and central organizing committee are mainly from Doyang and Tengani region of Golaghat district of Assam where KMSS already have strongholds in the regions. SSMSS, the organisation for tea-garden labourers has currently only 10,000 members. Deepak Rahi Das, president of the organisation explains the poor enrollment of tea garden workers as a result of many other

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<sup>23</sup> Omvedt, G. (1994). 'We want the return for our sweat': The new peasant movement in India and the formation of a national agricultural policy. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 21 (3-4), 126-164.

organisations which already exists to work for the community.<sup>24</sup> The student's wing of KMSS- the SMSS has gradually emerged as a potential group, and has managed to penetrate the student community of Assam with its presence in almost all the educational institutions of the state- both universities and colleges in a short span of time. It is emerging strong both in the Brahmaputra and the Barak valley of Assam. Not only it has won major student body elections, it has also been an active catalyst of KMSS in carrying out its organisational work, campaigns and mobilisation in the rural areas. The cadres of SMSS are dedicated youths, working in the remote areas of Assam, carrying the message of KMSS.

The greatest boon of KMSS's activism was that it had successfully mobilised the people at the grassroots in Assam, bringing them from the margins to the main political arena of Assam. The coming of the peasants, the landless, the poor and the forest dwellers of Assam and forming a potent force driving Assam's politics was a unique aspect in history of Assam's politics which otherwise was only a middle class phenomenon driven by identity. Akhil Gogoi's activism at the grassroots and bringing the narrative of the poor and the landless made him a popular leader of the masses. The bringing of the left politics in the mainstream politics of Assam was a turning point. But soon it was engulfed by its own narrow nationalism particularly of the ethno-nationalist Assamese sentiment. Their interest of evolving towards a more distinct ethnic Assamese identity was limited for a left organisation to spread in nook and corner of Assam.

The issues raised by peasants today are many. Jurgen Habermas opines that new social movements develop as a result of intrusion by the state and the market into the areas of private life.<sup>25</sup> This active role of the state and the market which has brought change in the economy, culture and tradition of a rural agrarian society has prompted collective action from the masses. For globalisation is not uniform and affects people in a multiplicity, issues that have engulfed the rural and the agrarian are not only land related issues but a host of other socio-political and cultural insecurities though economic distress is a common phenomenon. The struggle and resistance against the state by KMSS is a new advent of peasant politics into areas affected by globalisation. Effectively drawing from these it is observable how

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<sup>24</sup> Deepak Rahi Das, personal communication, October 9, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Editors of the Salem Press. (2011). *Theories of Social Movements*. California: Salem Press, p. 94.



KMSS is giving a new edge and direction to the contemporary peasant mobilisation in Assam. Contemporary peasant mobilisation by KMSS is a breakthrough into areas of public life which was otherwise absent in the domain of peasant politics, thereby providing a new direction to the left politics in Assam though limited by the legal approach adopted by the Indian state and also partly because of the organisation's narrow nationalist ambitions.

## Glossary

<i>Asur</i>	Demon
<i>Anchalik</i>	rural administrative unit above Panchayat
<i>Anganwadi</i>	courtyard, generally the open place in households of India
<i>Bigha</i>	a measure of land area where 5 kathas or 2500 square meters make one bigha
<i>Bania</i>	a merchant/trader in India
<i>Bazaar</i>	a market place
<i>Bohag</i>	the first month of the Assamese calendar
<i>Bora</i>	a kind of sticky glutinous rice widely cultivated in Assam and in the northeastern states of India
<i>Bhogali</i>	comes from the word 'Bhog' meaning feast
<i>Bhuj-Bhaat</i>	feast
Bongali	Bengali speaking people
<i>Danavia</i>	demonic
<i>Dharna</i>	strike
<i>Dharabahik</i>	continuous/unending
<i>Dheki</i>	a rice pounding equipment
<i>Gaon</i>	a village

<i>Garh</i>	fort
<i>Gamusha</i>	a wide, rectangular, white woven piece of cotton cloth with red borders generally given to the elders as a token of respect. <i>Ga</i> meaning ‘body’ and <i>musha</i> meaning ‘to wipe off’. So <i>gamusa</i> means to wipe the body.
<i>Hengdang</i>	a single edged sword used by the Ahoms in Assam during its rule.
<i>Joha</i>	a type of rice in Assam known for its excellent taste and aroma
<i>Hukati Maas</i>	Smoke dry fermented fish and taro leaves mashed together and kept in a bamboo pole for months, later used as a savory.
<i>Katcha</i>	raw materials like mud, bamboo, straw, leaves etc.
<i>Kati</i>	the seventh month of the Assamese calender
<i>Kisan</i>	a peasant
<i>Kongali</i>	barren, empty
<i>Lakh</i>	a hundred thousand (1,00,000)
<i>Lathi</i>	a stick
<i>Lathicharge</i>	the tactic of charging a crowd with lathis and battons
<i>Lubhia</i>	greedy
<i>Magh</i>	the tenth month of the Assamese calender
<i>Mahkuma</i>	rural administrative unit above Anchalik
<i>Mazdoor</i>	a worker
<i>Malik</i>	an owner, a chief or a landlord

<i>Maratmak</i>	deadly
<i>Myadi</i>	permanent/periodic; here it means permanent land settlement
<i>Naam Kirtan</i>	devotional songs of Vaishnavism in Assam
<i>Namghar</i>	Vaishnavite prayer/meeting houses in Assam
<i>Netas</i>	Leaders
<i>Panchayat</i>	a village council
<i>Raij mel</i>	an assembly of people for discussing common issues
<i>Sabha</i>	Assembly, Council
<i>Satyagraha</i>	Gandhian idea of ‘holding onto truth’, <i>Satya</i> meaning ‘truth’ and <i>Graha</i> meaning ‘sticking on’
<i>Sattras</i>	institutional centers of Ekasarana tradition of Vaishnavism as propagated by Srimanta Sankardev
<i>Taator Haal</i>	a hand operated weaving apparatus of Assam
<i>Zilla</i>	district

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## Some selected images

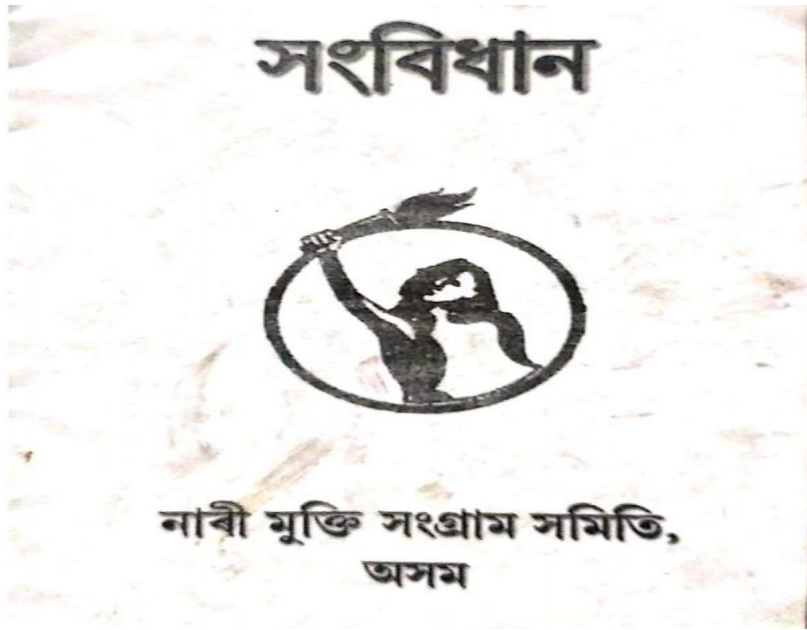


The logo of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti



The emblem of Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti.





An imprint of the first page of *Nari Mukti Sangram Samiti*'s constitution. The fist of the woman in the logo signifies unity, oneness, the larger struggle and the movement of the women kind. The torch is a sign of destroying/burning the age old sufferings of the women and making a new world for the women.



Hemandra Baruah, 73 years was the president of the Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti who led the movement against eviction and for land rights in Tengani.



Dharmeswar Saikia, 64, was the founder secretary of the Doyang Mukti Sangram Samiti. Saikia left his parental home in Jorhat because of insecurity of livelihood and sought refuge in Doyang.



From left to right- Nipen Das, member of Rajjor Dal, Hemendra Baruah president of Brihhat Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti, Maina Tamuly member of Satro Mukti Sangram Samiti actively campaigning for the upcoming Assam assembly elections in January 2021 and for

the release of Akhil Gogoi in Tengani. The posters of its political party- Raijor Dal can be seen pasted on the shops of Tengani.



Janmoni Saikia was 15 year old when she participated in the movement against eviction in Tengani.



A massive rally of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti of 10,000 people from Doyang and Tengani in Golaghat in 2008. Source: <https://www.assamtimes.org/node/1945>



KMSS against price hike of city bus fare and cooking gas

Source: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/arrested-over-caa-protests-activist-akhil-gogoi-remanded-to-judicial-custody-for-14-days-once-again-2453885.html>



Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti leader Akhil Gogoi along with its supporters raising slogans against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill

Source: <https://www.asianage.com/opinion/oped/281119/citizenship-bill-will-create-more-problems-than-it-might-solve.html>



Medha Patkar joins Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti in a protest site in the Assam- Arunachal Pradesh border against mega dams in 2010

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Patkar-leads-protest-against-mega-dam-projects/article16196561.ece>



Akhil Gogoi joins the India Against Corruption movement in 2011

Source: <https://www.timesofassam.com/headlines/assam-farmer-killing-and-role-of-akhil-gogoi/>



Members of KMSS putting forward its demands before the then Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi

Source: <https://www.prokerala.com/news/photos/guwahati-tarun-gogoi-during-a-meeting-with-akhil-gogoi-28903.html>



A fund raising campaign by members of KMSS to fight the legal battle for its leader Akhil Gogoi in August 2020



A major protest of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti on price rise in one of the busy streets of Guwahati on 12<sup>th</sup> October, 2018.



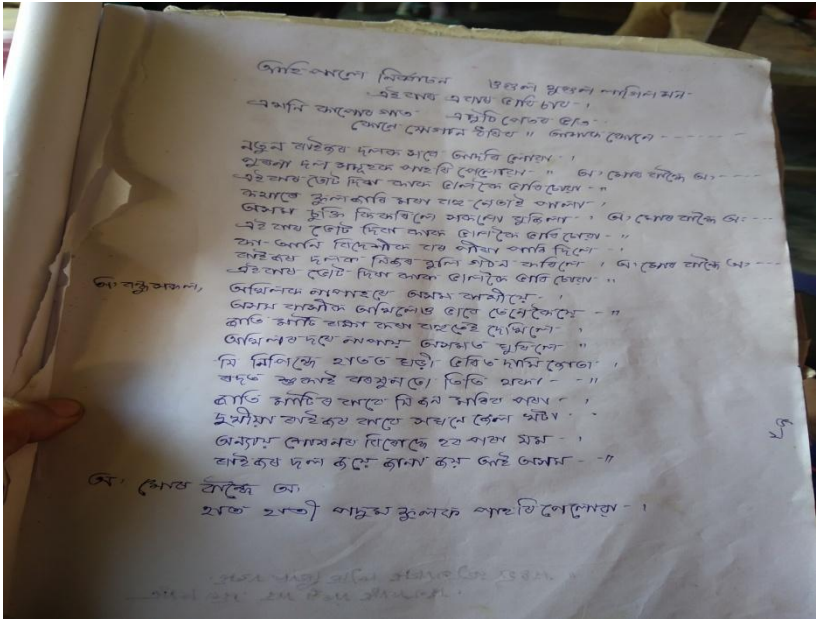
Clockwise are the images of the variety of rice in Assam, bell metals of Assam, herbal medicine, and photo gallery of the orchids in Assam displayed at the Kaziranga National Orchid and Biodiversity Park.



METROPOLIS  
2021-03-24

Some images at the Kaziranga National Orchid and Biodiversity Park.





An excerpt from the notebook of Khagen Das's poems. The above poem is written for the Assam assembly elections of 2021.



The poet Khagen Das of Tengani



A still of the landscape of a village in Tengani. One can see that not even an inch of land is laid barren.



The narrow bamboo bridge on the river Doyang, which is a shortcut to Tengani



A poster on a traditional gamusa written in Assamese language is displayed in one of the shops in Dighali Maaj gaon in Tengani in January 2021. It says, “We won’t accept CAA. Release Akhil Gogoi”.



In front of the house of Dharmeswar Saikia of Doyang.

### **List of persons interviewed with date**

Hiren Gohain	19.01.2021; 23.01.2021; 24.01.2021; 25.01.2021
Akhil Gogoi, KMSS	17.01.2018; 17.01.2019 and 21.02.2019
Mukut Deka, KMSS	01.07.2020; 23.07.2020; 03.10.2020
Raju Bora, KMSS	21.01.2020 and 28.03.2020
Bhasco De Saikia, KMSS	02.09.2020 and 20.10.2020
Kamal Kumar Medhi	28.03.2020
Manik Laskar	29.03.2020
Deepak Rahi Das, SSMSS	09.10.2020
Bimala Gogoi, NMSS	05.01.2021
Pranjal Kalita, SMSS	20.01.2021
Bidyut Saikia, SMSS	03.08.2020; 11.08.2020
Manash Konwar, SMSS	03.08.2020
Bedabrat Gogoi, SMSS	25.12.2018; 18.03.2020
Ashraful Hussain, SMSS	31.05.2020; 03.06.2020 and 09.06.2020

