

In the name of the 'People': Cultivating Identity and the Peasant in Assam

Indrani Talukdar

Historically, the processes of uneven development, internal colonialism, neo-colonialism as well as the centre-periphery debate have occupied the central stage in the discourse on ethnic based nationalism in the North-east India. In the understanding of these mobilisations, what role do cultural factors play? The paper identifies this question with the role played by Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (Revolutionary Forum for Peasant Liberation), a leading and prominent peasant organisation in contemporary period that also identifies itself with the ethno-nationalist question in Assam, India. It is primarily a peasant organisation which has mobilised landless peasants for land rights in forest villages, thus leading to constant tussle between the 'encroached' peasants and the globalised state and its institutions. By tracing its genesis from its inception during the post-independence period, the paper highlights how through the politicisation of ethnic identities based on the control of resources, a horizontal mobilisation is formed across caste and religious lines by leaders, to maintain the legitimacy of the 'culture'. In popular politics while the question of identity assertions is largely dismissed as 'identity politics', what must be noted as to how politics based on the 'identity' shapes itself, especially in the debate around populism. The pilot study conducted for the paper suggests, that it is not merely peasant populism nor regional populism.

It argues that asymmetrical power structures and their institutions impact the course of mobilisation and negotiations at various levels in the form of cultural 'repertoires' as tactics and strategies. A peasant-based movement lends its voice to the national forum by actively participating for the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and against the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2016 in Assam. The paper finds that over the period, the issue of land and natural resources (economic struggle), and the advancement of 'development' through legal and democratic means (rule of governance) have been consolidated by the process of ethnic standardisation. The paper thus questions whether culture is a strategic resource in the populist movement or is it an adaptable apparatus to protect from the neo-liberal onslaught.