

The Contentious Politics and Street Demonstrations: A Study on the Recent Trends in Assam

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Abstract: *Street Demonstrations are among the most frequently performed forms of Contentious Politics. These are the collective actions, where collective action means coordinating efforts on the behalf of shared interests or programs, performed in the streets where the participants try to make a claim or a set of claims to an object or the receiver of the claim, which is generally the agent of the government, either dealing with them directly or engaging in activities bearing on governmental rights, regulations and interests (Tilly, 2008). Charles Tilly has also argued that street demonstrations are one of the performances that bundle into 'Repertoire of contention' which are again culturally and historically embedded. Participants in such contentious politics are enacting available scripts within which they innovate but mostly in small ways. As a consequence street demonstrations are the same and different in every time they occur. The main objective of this paper is to analyze various trends emerging out such series of street demonstration across India and especially in Assam. I also try to analyze the historically and culturally embedded 'Repertoire of Contention' (Tilly 1995.15-42) of Assam and its various manifestations.*

Keywords: *Street Demonstration, Repertoire of contention, Trends, Contentious Politics*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the winters of 2016, the world witnessed a series of massive street demonstrations in South Korea with millions of people protesting in the street of Seoul, demanding their president to step down due to a corruption scandal. The ever-growing million strong protesters forced the parliamentarians to consider the impeachment process of the president Park Guen-Hye. The well organized and civil candlelight vigils of million strong protesters put up a show that took the world by surprise and saw the eventual impeachment of the president.

On 29th June 2018, at least ten thousand people, under the banner of various indigenous student and other organizations met in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam, to protest against the citizenship (amendment) bill, 2016. The protesters met at the Latasil Field, in Uzanbazar area of the city, walked in a procession, raising slogan against the bill and the Government, for more than seven kilometers through the city and ended at Chandmari area.

Although there are differences, these two isolated events intersect in many ways. What they have in common are, they all made claims on other people, they are using the streets for public performances to do so, drew on different forms of collective action, and took advantage of existing political opportunities.

Tarrow in his book *Power in social movement* holds that, when collective actors join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities and opponents, around their claims or claims of those they claim to represent, it's called contentious politics. It occurs when the ordinary people generally in alliance with more influential people and with the change in public mood, join forces in confrontation with their opponents. (Tarrow, 1994). Tarrow also holds that contentious politics emerges when the changing of political opportunities and limits create incentives to take action for the stakeholders who lack the resources and strength of their own (Tarrow, 1994). In *Contentious Performances*, Charles Tilly (2008,5) states "Contentious politics involves interaction in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, in which government appears either as targets, initiators, or third parties. Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics."

When these claim making exercise of contentious politics done in a way that involves mounting, coordinating, and sustaining against powerful opponents, it can be considered as a social movement. These contentious politics has to be backed by well structured social networks symbols, actions which are culturally resonant and sustained negotiation and interaction with the opponent to be transformed in a social movement.

These contentious politics goes back to the dawn of history. Ordinary people often make an effort to wield power by contentious means against the nation-state or powerful opponents. In the last half of the century alone American civil rights movement, revolt against the authoritarianism in both Europe and the third world country, the rise of the Islamist movement, have brought masses of people to the protest demonstration on the streets. (Tarrow 1994). Different powerful contentious political protests include likes of Protestant Reformation

1517-1685, Boston Tea Party 1773, Women's suffrage Parade 1913, Gandhi Salt march in 1930 and march on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi equal (Tarrow, 1994)rights and Liberation 1993.

The study of contentious politics can be ranged from a simple individual interaction to a bloody revolution. There are different claim making performances or contentious performances that are available in a particular situation which ranges from the creation of special purpose association, street demonstration, petition drives, public meetings and it also includes various forms of non-violent actions to various forms of armed attacks. These Contentious performances are learned and historically grounded ways of making claims on other people. These performances behave like some loosely scripted Theatre. (Tilly, 2006). These performances cluster into a 'Repertoire' of claim-making exercises that are applicable to the same kind of claimant-object pair: bosses and workers, peasants and landlords, etc. Repertoire varies from pair to pair, place to place and time to time as these are historically and culturally embedded in nature. Social movement activists in modern Europe uses a kind of mixture of street demonstrations, petition drives, press meetings etc but do not indulge in a suicide bombing or hostage taking (Tilly 2004).In this paper I am going to concentrate on one such claim making performance that is widely used in contentious politics, that is Street Demonstration.

A street demonstration is an example of contentious performance. It is omnipresent all over the world. There will be hardly any issue of a daily news paper without news of a street demonstration. There were 4, 20,000 street protests in India alone over five years from 2009 to 2014- an average of 200 protests every day nationwide. (Sood and Singhal, 2016) .Casquete (2006: 47) defines street demonstration as collective gatherings in the public space whose aim it is to exert political, social, and/or cultural influence on authorities, public opinion and participants through the disciplined and peaceful expression of an opinion and demand". The degree of peacefulness and discipline will definitely vary but the street demonstration is different from riots and street violence. Fillieule (2011) makes a distinction between collective gatherings and street demonstration in the following four ways:

- i) Temporary *occupations* of open public and private space, for example, streets, hotel lobby, mall, etc. This categorically excludes gatherings within a workshop, marches from workshop to workshop etc.
- ii) Demonstrations involve *Collective action*, thereby excluding individual political actions
- iii) Street demonstrations are *expressive*; it involves a visual expression of social, political and/or cultural demands for its participants and the public, which excludes random crowds without any affirmation or principle.
- iv) Street demonstrations are essentially *political* through making socio-political claims which also includes ceremonial rallies like political burials and festive parades like gay or love parades which are also politicized to a degree.(Steklenburg, Walgrave, Klandermans, Verhulst, 2012)

Street demonstrations are basically collective actions, where collective action means coordinating efforts on the behalf of shared interests or programs, performed in the street where the participants try to make a claim or a set of claims to an object or the receiver of the claim which is generally agents of the government either dealing with them directly or engaging in activities bearing on governmental rights, regulations and interests. (Tilly, 2008).

Tilly positions the origin of the street demonstration in Great Britain between 1758 and 1834. It became *the* performance staged by social movements; it soon became a multi-purpose tool rather than an instrument oriented to some single goal or political inclination. By the 1830s British activists had learned to mount all three variants of the street demonstration that are still familiar today: the march through public streets, the occupation of a public space for a gathering, and the combination of the two in a march to or from the meeting space. Around a hundred years' later street demonstrations made it to France to become the major means of advertising political identities and programs in France after World War I. (Klandermans, Stekelenburg, Walgrave, 2014).

History of Contentious politics and street demonstration

Protestant Reformation (1517-1685) is one of the earliest examples of contentious politics and public demonstrations. It was a great challenge to the religious authority of that time that went beyond the Catholic Church. Martin Luther, a German monk, started questioning the authority of the church in the affairs of men and with the publication of his 'Ninety-five theses' the questioning and protesting turn into a revolution across Europe. The church taught that it alone was God's instrument and representative on earth and salvation can be attained by its means. The reform spearheaded by Luther questions this very position of the church. His 'Ninety-five theses' was instrumental in the spread of the rebellion. His vary act of nailing his 'Ninety-five theses' to the doors of the church in Wittenberg proved to an act of exemplary contention throughout history. As the dissent and protest against the church began to increase, several individuals like Zwingli, John Calvin, Henry viii, emerged as prominent figures in the Reformation. This disruption of Church affairs triggered protests, wars, persecutions, counter-reformations throughout Europe. This reformation now stands as a testament to the fact that where an omnipotent authority claims supremacy over affairs of men, it is in the interest of all men to question about the source of such authority. (Bishop, 2016)

'Boston Tea Party' was an iconic protest. It was a political protest led by American colonists on Boston Massachusetts, on December 16, 1773, and it escalated into American Revolution. Colonists were frustrated by taxation without representation in the British Parliament. They were particularly agitated by the 'Tea act of May 1773'. The demonstrators, some disguised as Native Americans dumped 342 chests of British tea into the harbor. It was the first major act of resistance by colonist and left an unprecedented legacy. Boston Tea Party has been referred in so many political protests. M.K. Gandhi's leading of mass burning of Indian registrations in South Africa was then compared to the Boston Tea Party in Newspapers. When Gandhi met British Viceroy after the Indian Salt protests in 1930's, he took some salt in his shawl and said that it was to remind us of the great Boston Tea Party ("Boston Tea Party" n. d.).

Women Suffrage march on March 3, 1913, was led by Inez Milholland, a lawyer by profession in the capital of United States. Behind Inez, there were nine bands, four mounted brigades, three heralds, about twenty-four floats and more than 5000 demonstrators marched on that day. That march came at a time when the entire suffrage movement needed an infusion on intensity. Women had been struggling for their representation through voting right for nearly seventy years and the goal was to attain full voting rights nationwide. National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was behind the organization of the march. Women from all the section of the society participated in the march. The mistreatment of the marchers by the male crowd and police men was also highlighted. The march was successful in getting international and national attention to a great extent and inspired others and contributed towards the long history of women's campaign from suffrage in the United States. (Harvey, 2001)

The Salt Satyagraha was initiated by M.K. Gandhi on 12th March 1930 as an integral part of the civil disobedience movement (1930-1931). It was initiated by Gandhi as a reaction to the implementation of taxation on salt by the Salt Commission and thereby salt inaccessible to the poor population. Gandhi completed over 390-kilometer march from Sabarmati Ashram to the coastal village of Dandi, Gujrat with 50,000 people gathered at Dandi. It was successful in drawing the world's attention. Millions around the world saw Gandhi in the newsreels of that march. The Salt Satyagraha campaign was instrumental in forcing British to recognize that their control of India depended entirely on the consent of the Indians and Salt Satyagraha was an important part in Britishers losing their consent of Indian people. (Chopra, 2016)

The LGBT rights movement in the United States grew substantially during the latter half of the 20th century. On April 25, 1993, nearly a million people attended the march on Washington that day making it the largest street demonstration in the history of the United States to that time. The event was groundbreaking in getting unprecedented media coverage and establishing direct institutional ties between civil rights movement and LGBTQ rights movement (Beemyn, 2004)

Significance of the Study

Contentious politics is the result of ordinary people's effort to have their say on power relations. The exercise of contentious politics has brought more paradigm shifts in society than any other vehicle of change could. The contentious politics ranges from individual interactions to revolutions making it a large domain of study. Most of the long term, as well as short term sociological study of contentious politics in India in general and Assam in particular, has concentrated mainly on social movement aspect of contentious politics. The study of tactics adopted in contentious politics to showcase the contention is even rare in this case. Some journalistic surveys have been done on street demonstration as a tactic of contention but sociological studies are not traceable. These surveys exhibit fragmented knowledge since they lack the sociological tool for explicating the dynamics of the contentious events.

Studying of the tactical dimension of contentious politics is important because these tactics are common across different types of social movements and it is a shift from studying the organizational aspect of a social movement to a more event specific study. This study tries to understand the 'street demonstration' as a tactic of contentious politics by using the 'Repertoire of contention' model developed by Charles Tilly. Understanding the socio-demographic features of street demonstration participants will provide a base for making sense of tactical variations across various instances of contentious politics. This study examines the characteristics of street demonstration repertoire and how it is perceived by its audience, thereby making an effort to understand its impact on a different section of society. As such this study is very significant. Both at the social as well as academic levels.

Theoretical Framework

Contentious politics is the act of collective actors joining forces to confront authorities, elites, and opponents and making claims on them for their own and/or for the interests of those whom they claim to represent. (Tarrow, 1994, 1998, 2011). There are different tactics of contention used to make the claims visible and these are developed across time and political, social and cultural context. Burning of an effigy, Boycotts, Mass Petitioning, street demonstration, blockade, public meeting, and other various non-violent contentions are used in displaying contention. The present study on 'Street Demonstration', is hugely influenced by sociologists of 'contentious politics' approach, Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, who mainly focused on the political nature of various collective actions. They have provided many conceptual and methodological tools for the study of

such political events. Here Tilly's concept of 'Repertoire of Contention' has been taken into account (Tilly 1995.15-42). He considers these tactics of contentions as shared scripts and is historically and culturally embedded. Tilly opined that these tactics of contentions can be explained in terms of two metaphors, namely Performance, and Repertoire. Performance because these tactics of contentions are like shared scripts and these performances are clustered into a repertoire of claim-making routines that is often applicable to the same object and claimant pair. Repertoire also varies from time to time and place to place. In the present study, the researcher will try to understand the characteristics of street demonstration as a tactic of contention.

II. METHODOLOGY

For this study, we have mostly relied on secondary resources. We analyzed various newspaper reports and YouTube videos of various news channels. We gathered most of the secondary data for analyzing different trends in protest demonstrations from the platform called ACLED (Armed conflict location and event data project). It is basically a conflict collection analysis and crisis mapping project. ACLED collects information about the date, location and fatalities of various reported protests, and political violence across the globe. ACLED collects its data from various sources like reports from government agencies, humanitarian agencies, research publications and local media reports. It also collaborates with various local conflict observatories like Yemen Data projects and Syrian Network for human rights.

Various Trends in Protest Demonstration

According to ACLED (Armed conflict location and event data project) of all the events in India demonstration makeup 90%, but it varies depending on the how they are being manifested, who is involved and what state or region of India they occur.

There are a different type of demonstration that can be seen all across India. Some are as follows,

Dharna: It is a mode of demanding, or staging a demand by sitting at the doors of an establishment or government offices.

Gherao: It is a kind of protest where the protesting party tries to prevent the against party or the authority from getting out of their offices until their demands are met with.

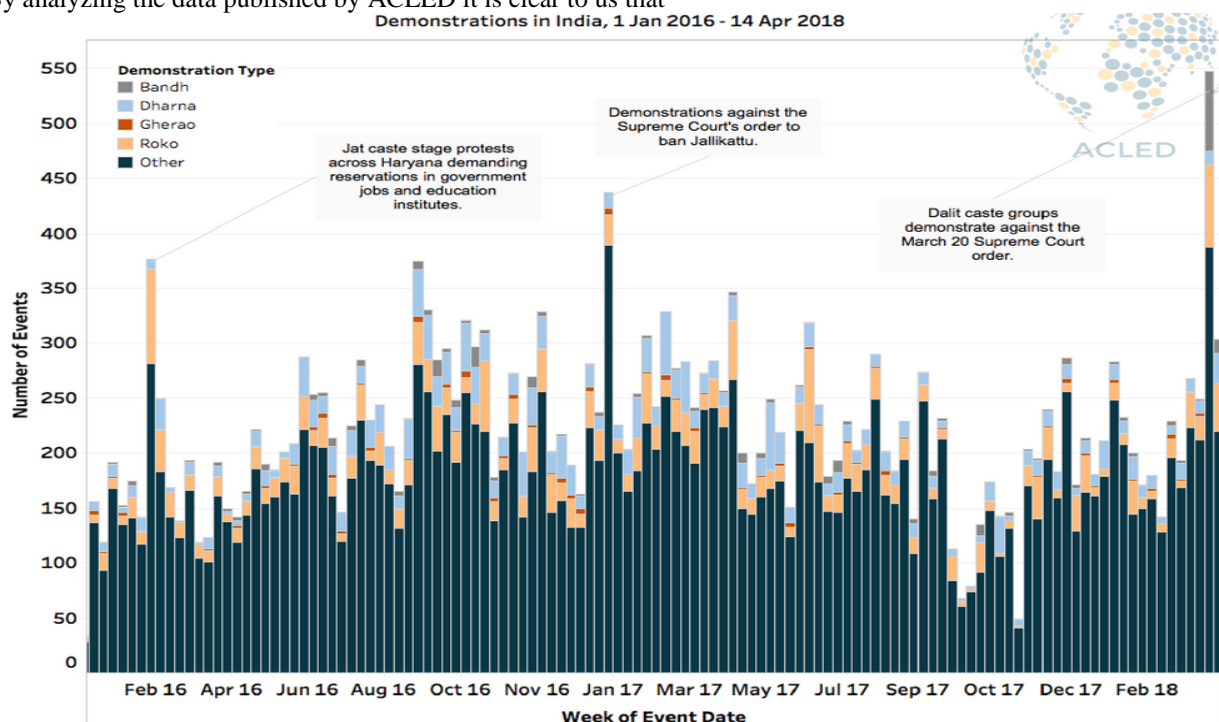
Roko: It typically involves obstructing a road or railways. It's a very common practice in India to show discontent and an effort to be heard.

Jail Bharo: It is a method of protesting where the protesting party tries to get arrested voluntarily to fill the jails.

Bandh: It is a kind of strike which is called by different political and non-political organizations where they expect all the general public to stay at home without reporting to work and all the commercial markets to be closed so that there will be a complete halt.

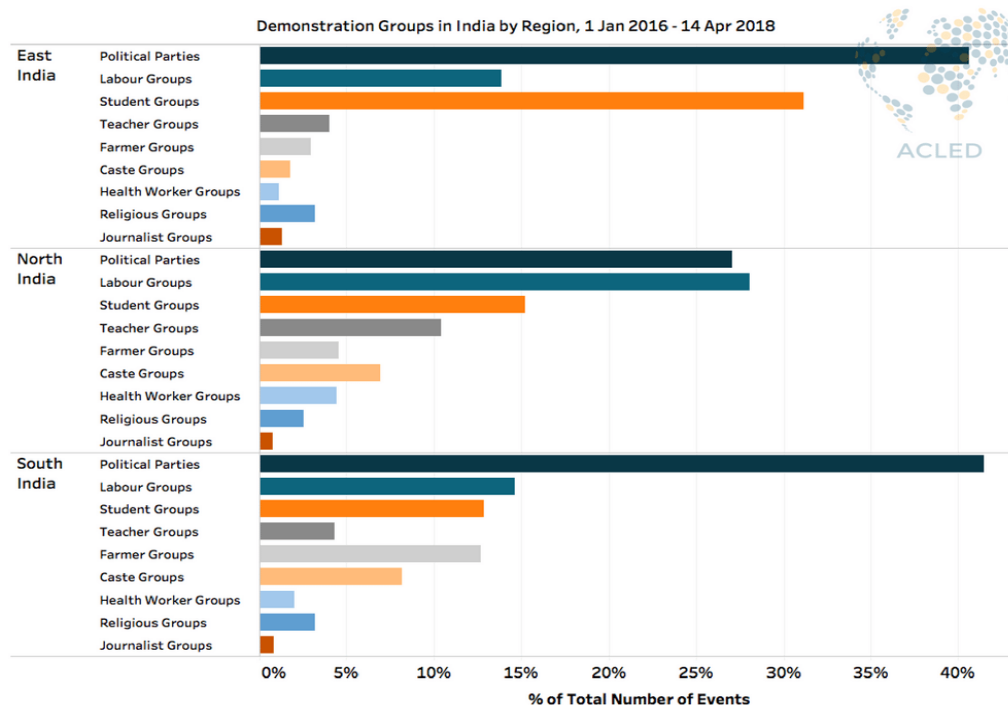
Hunger strike: It is a refusal to eat by the demonstrators so that their health deteriorate in a manner to gain emotional support for the cause and make the establishment nervous. (Swartzendruber, ACLED bringing clarity to crisis, 2018)

By analyzing the data published by ACLED it is clear to us that



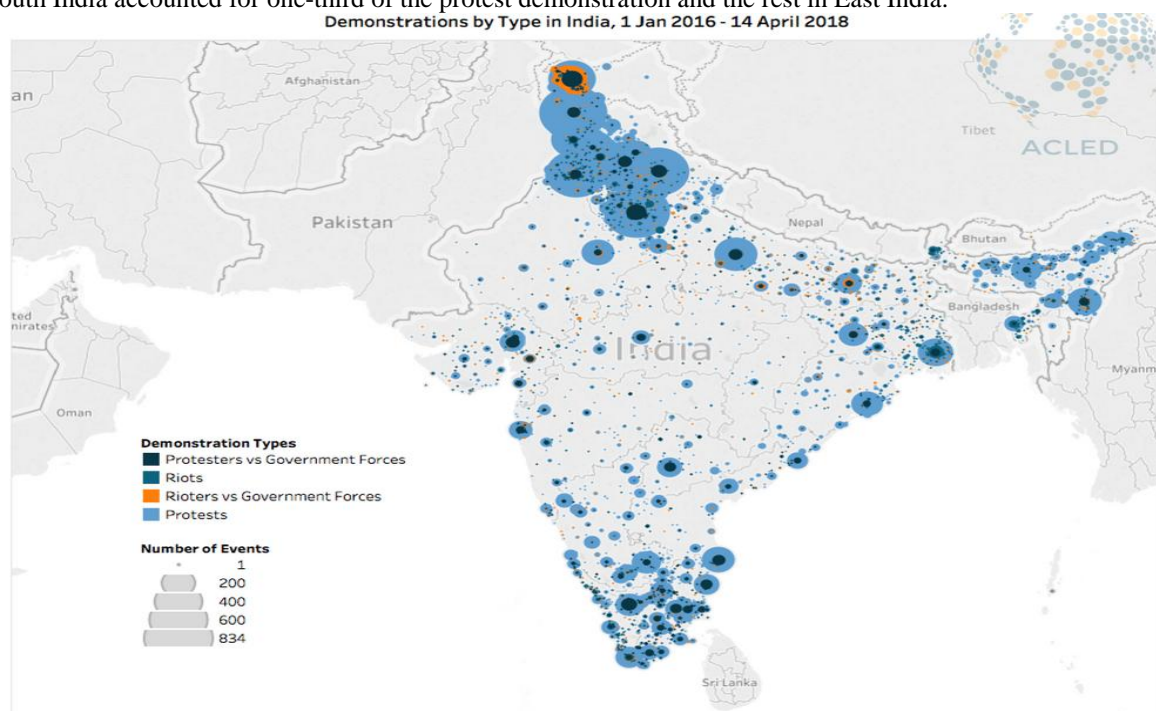
Source: ACLED (Armed conflict location and event data project) Figure1

From 1 January 2016 to 14 April 2018, there are three distinct spikes (Figure 1) (Hussain, 1993) in the graphs which are resulted from February 2016 when Jats staged demands for reservations in educational institutions and government jobs. The second spike that we can see in the graph were demonstrations against Supreme Court's order to ban Jallikattu. The third spike is in April 2018 because of the demonstration staged by Dalit groups against the Supreme Court order that diluted provisions of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) act of 1989.



Source: ACLED (Armed Conflict location and event data project) Figure 2

After analyzing the demonstrations (see the graph above) on the basis of types of groups initiating the demonstrations, there were mostly nine groups, and among them, the political parties involved in the highest number of demonstrations across the country. But in North India Labor groups formed the majority group in staging protests. Since January 2016 more than 50% of the protest demonstration took place in North India, South India accounted for one-third of the protest demonstration and the rest in East India.



Source: ACLED (Armed conflict location and event data project) Figure 3

Above is the geographical distribution of protests and its nature across the country.

In the context of Assam, It has always been considered as a politically contentious state with the history of various mass movements in the post-independence era. Mass mobilizations like Assam movement, Bodo movement, the movement against Big-dam projects and the recent series of protests against the Citizenship amendment bill 2016, witnessed a huge number of people came out on the street to show their discontent.

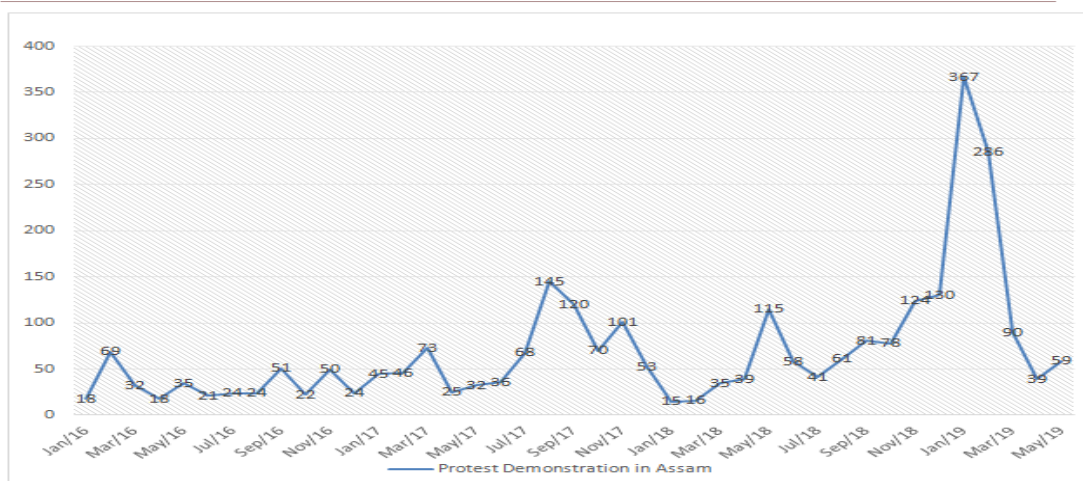
The Assam movement on the issue of foreigners in Assam witnessed massive participation people all over the Brahmaputra valley. On its peak, there were programs of 'Satyagraha' in the front of the offices of deputy commissioners and sub-divisional offices.(Hussain, 1989). He quoted "Those who had seen the last days of 'Satyagraha', particularly at Guwahati, would sure to remember it for the lifetime as the vast sea of humanity gathered as never before in the areas around the deputy commissioners court, high court, pan bazar, Dighali Pukhuri areas to offer' Satyagraha." The government had to build many temporary jails to accommodate the arrested 'Satyagrahis'(ibid).

Bodoland Movement is another significant movement in the history of post-independence Assam. The Bodo political consciousness can be easily traced back to a time when demand was put in front of the Simon Commission for a separate electorate for Bodos, which was in 1927(Amravat,2016). The year 1986 is also considered to be a turning point in the history of the Bodoland Movement. In that year Upendra Nath Brahma was made the president of ABSU, and for the very first time, they launched the movement which includes demands for equality, economic and social justice, rights to protection of their culture, land, and language (ibid).

After the articulation of specific demands, the movement took flight but became bloody after some time. There were long episodes of Bandhs up to 14 days at a stretch in the year 1989. There was a 1001 hours total Assam bandh in 1992, which resulted in large scale violence. (ibid). At the beginning phase, the movement was relatively peaceful marked by episodes of bandhs, highways, and railway blockades. But slowly The Bodoland movement has deviated from peaceful protests to various violent tactics like cadres attacking various government controlled establishments like schools, hospitals, offices, etc. and sometimes engaging in conflicts with other communities as well (Basumatary, 2014)

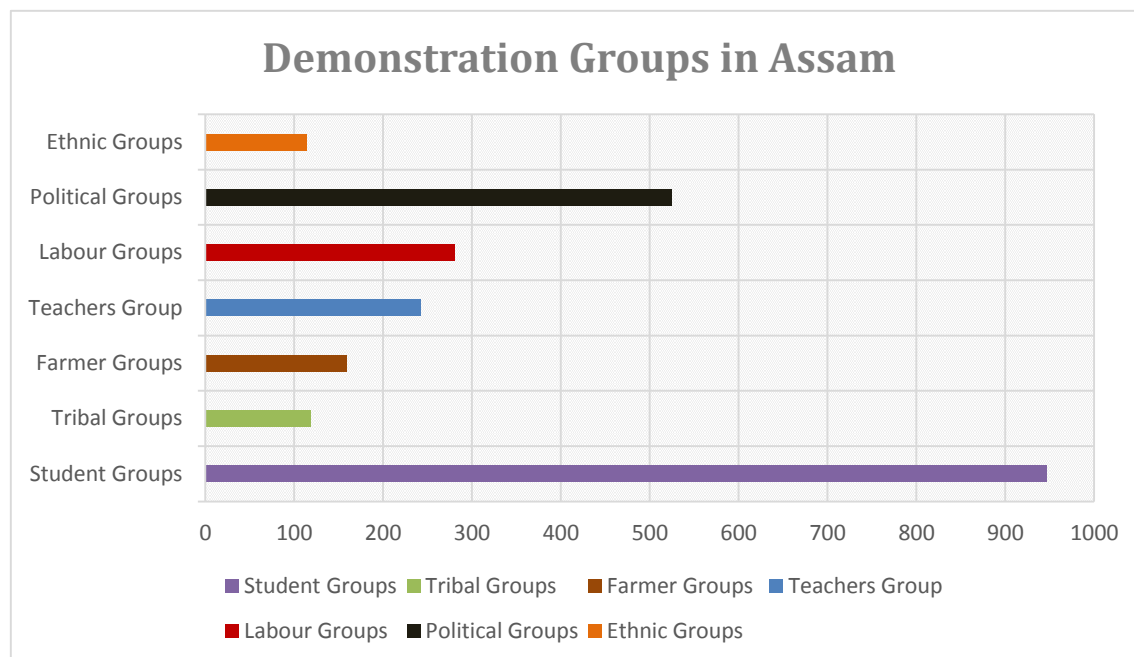
There are also huge public resistances against various development activities initiated by the government of India across the state of Assam. The recent policies of Government to turn the whole region of northeast India into the future powerhouse of the country by constructing various large dams on its rivers are being met with widespread protest in the region (Sharma, 2018). The construction of the Lower Subansiri Dam has particularly become a contentious issue across the north-east region, especially in Assam. The protesters of KMSS, TMPK and AJYCP continuously blocked the national highway 52 to stop the transportation of various Dam building materials to Gerukamukh, the Dam construction site. Any activity on the dam site or by the government regarding fresh tenders are met with fresh protests demonstration at various district headquarters by these organizations. (ibid)

The citizenship amendment bill is also proving to be a highly contentious issue for entire north-east India and especially for the state of Assam. The months of January and February witnessed continuous protests (see figure 4) across North-east and in all over Assam. This period also witnessed numerous vigils, blocking of highways, railways, marches with clothes off, seeking revocation of the Bill. In Guwahati, as many as 70 organizations led by KMSS and AJYCP organized protests demonstrations in front of various government offices and tried to go pass the barricades to the state secretariat and thereby engaged in tussles with the police. There were also a series of Bandhs, jail bhara programs throughout the period. ("Protest continue in Assam", 2019)



Source: ACLED (Armed conflict location and event data project)

With the above data we can see that in Assam there are almost 70 protests demonstration in a month. The spikes that we can see in January and February 2019, and in May 2018 were due to the large scale protest against the highly contentious bill, the citizenship bill, 2016, across the state of Assam.



Source: Armed conflict location and event data project (ACLED)

It is now clear that (see the chart above) among the groups that were usually engaged in demonstrations namely ethnic groups, political groups, labour groups, teacher groups, farmer groups, tribal groups and student groups, the Student groups staged the highest number of demonstration throughout the time period from January 2016 to April 2019 across Assam. This is contrasting from the other region of India (see figure1) where it is the Political parties that engaged in the most number of demonstrations.

III. CONCLUSION

The street demonstration is the perfect example of contentious performance and its omnipresence across the globe makes it a very important field of investigation. Protest demonstrations as contentious performances do not appear out of thin air but are always learned and culturally and historically grounded. These performances differ from place to place and time to time. As the new types of contentious performances evolve over time, the whole repertoire of contention (Tilly 1995:15-42) emerges like a shared script. In India, the current repertoire consists of 'Bandh', 'Roko', 'Jail Bharo', 'Gherao', 'Hunger strike' etc.

Issues like reservations in Jobs and educational institutes as demanded by the Jats, court orders interfering age-old traditions like Jallikattu, Sabarimala etc leads to massive protest demonstration across India in recent times. The labor groups are most contentious in North India while Political parties are most visible on the streets of eastern and southern India. Whereas in Assam, the student groups are most likely to come out on the street for a protest demonstration.

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