



ICSSR NERC

THE GUWAHATI DECLARATION AND THE ROAD TO PEACE IN ASSAM

162
-CL

Hussain

THE GUWAHATI DECLARATION
AND
THE ROAD TO PEACE IN ASSAM



EDITOR:
Imdad Hussain

AKANSHA PUBLISHING HOUSE
NEW DELHI

Preface

In the past decade or so the political violence and the ongoing insurgencies in India's troubled north-east has spawned a large number of publications, both scholarly and popular. The literature on Assam is itself fairly substantial and indeed, continues to grow. The focus of much of these, however, has been on the historical background or Assam's colonial legacy, or on social, economic and ethnic issues. Of late there has been, and for good reasons, a growing concern about the effects of the continuing unsettled political environment on her development process. Assam, the only State in the region with vast natural and human resources and so with great potential in growth, is today far behind most other States in agriculture and industry, in infrastructure and connectivity, in higher education, especially in science and technology, and in that vital area of employment generation. And yet the State's growth rate at the time of independence was, in spite of her neglect under British rule, was much higher than the national average.

What went wrong, and what is the way out? These are questions that are being increasingly asked by the people. One answer is that if Assam is to catch up with the other States, attract investment, promote tourism and develop to its fullest potential there has first to be an end to the violence. In early 2001, therefore, the North Eastern Regional Centre of the Indian Council of Social Science Research decided to bring together in a seminar scholars, administrators, the media, the notary public and concerned individuals to explore the possibilities of peace in Assam. The seminar was held in Guwahati during 29-30 August, and the outcome was the Guwahati Declaration. The views expressed in the papers read and in the discussions that followed each are now presented to the public in this slender volume. Editorial interventions have been kept to the minimum, if only to retain, as it were, the "flavour" of the original.

There has been regrettably, a considerable gap between the holding of the seminar and the publication of its proceedings. A

myriad details had to be attended to in the interim. The Editor's preoccupation with his academic work no less contributed to this delay. Still, the message of the seminar is as relevant today as it was three years ago. If peace has so far proved elusive the insights provided in the contributions deserves a closer consideration.

The seminar could not have been possible but for the enthusiastic support it received from individuals, organizations and the Government of Assam. The Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi and his youthful Minister of State for Home, Pradyut Bardoloi, who had just assumed office and were anxious to usher in an era of peace and prosperity to the beleaguered State, were supportive throughout. So too was Professor Mrinal Miri, Vice Chancellor, North Eastern Hill University and Chairman of the Regional Centre. We are very grateful to them. We are also grateful to all those who participated and presented papers at the seminar and became signatories in the Guwahati Declaration. Our thanks are also due to Jaideep Saikia who coordinated the seminar in Guwahati, and to Dr. Joshua Thomas, now Acting Director of the Regional Centre, who did much of the initial planning and saw to the publication of the proceedings. Finally, we thank Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, for bringing out the volume in good time and in excellent production quality.

Imdad Hussain

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	v
<i>Editor's Introduction</i>	1
1. Understanding Conflicts: Towards a Resolution — <i>J B Bhattacharjee</i>	18
2. Roots of Conflict — <i>Apurba K. Baruah</i>	32
3. Ethnic Unrest — <i>Hemanta Barman</i>	57
4. Cementing the Faultlines: Probable Options — <i>Gurudas Das</i>	71
5. Peace: Some Concerns and Considerations — <i>Sanjay Borbora</i>	79
6. Shrinking Democratic Space and the Role of Civil Society — <i>Udayon Misra</i>	89
7. Building Peace: Locating the Actors and their Roles — <i>Monirul Hussain</i>	105
8. Peace and Cultural Space — <i>Sajal Nag</i>	111
9. Assamese Women: Victims or Actors? — <i>Paula Banerjee</i>	119
10. Peace Through Development — <i>H. N. DAS</i>	133
11. Reconciliation and Peace - Dilemma of Development — <i>R. Gopalakrishnan</i>	152

12. Word as War: Resort to Reason — <i>Jaideep Saikia</i>	170
13. Arunachal Pradesh - A Precarious Balance — <i>Mamang Dai</i>	176
<i>Appendices</i>	
A. Report on the Seminar on Peace in Assam: Prospects and Possibilities	182
B. Guwahati Declaration and its Signatories	190
<i>Index</i>	192

Introduction

“Peace in Assam” as a seminar problem did not have a well defined theme, it was meant only to focus attention to the urgency of bringing normalcy to a state that had become, in the words of a former governor, “synonymous in the popular mind with violence and militancy”. Nevertheless what has emerged from the presentations, both written and oral, and the discussions that followed each constitute an attempt to understand the phenomenon of conflict and violence as a first desirable step in the direction of resolution.

It is now generally acknowledged that the ongoing insurgency in Assam took roots in the nineteen eighties when the popular movement against the illegal presence of foreign nationals in the state was at its peak. The four preceding decades were of course not entirely years of peace. As early as in 1950-51 there was an armed uprising led by the Revolutionary Communist Party in Upper Assam. This was quickly crushed by the Assam Police Battalion and units of the Assam Rifles, and the exploits of Khagen Borbora and “sten” Barua, two leaders who had caught the imagination of the people at the time, is now a forgotten chapter in Assam’s post colonial history. There had been several instances of communal violence, such as in Cachar immediately after partition, or in Goalpara at the time of the visit to Assam of the States Reorganisation Commission. In 1960 Assam experienced widespread disturbances over the issue of the official language of the State. Even as late as in 1969-70 there had been riots and non-Assamese speaking communities in a few towns in Upper Assam had become the victims of mob violence. All these were, however, relatively localised and unconnected affairs and easily contained by the state armed police. The events that followed the anti-foreigner agitation on the other hand were far more extensive and the militant organisations behind them were better organised, more lethally armed and led by ideologically motivated young men. The consequences of militancy

to the state and its development process, both economic and human, has proved more far reaching than anyone could have then anticipated.

The Anti-Foreigner Movement

As a prologue to the collections in this volume the anti-foreigner movement and Assam's slide into militancy, already the subject of considerable writing and innumerable academic discussions, is briefly told.¹ It all started with a protest rally held in Guwahati on 6 November 1979 by the All Assam Students Union (AASU), the apex organisation of all student bodies in the state. The AASU had been voicing concern since 1973 over the inclusion of non-Indian citizens in Assam's electoral rolls. But it was during the bye-elections to the Mangaldoi Parliamentary Constituency after the death of its member in April 1979 that exposed the magnitude of the problem. When the rolls were revised it was reportedly discovered that 45,000 voters, or one-sixth of the total electorate, were not citizens of India. That inclusion of such foreigners in the list of voters in other constituencies, both parliamentary and state assembly, could not be ruled out soon led to public outcry.

The result was the emergence of the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) or the umbrella organisation of several local groups. The AGSP began to work in tandem with the AASU in spearheading a movement demanding not only the deletion of the names of foreigners from the electoral rolls but also of their deportation from India. Their mass mobilisation of the people and other methods of protest took various forms, some remarkably novel, and were by and large peaceful and orderly. Nonetheless, violent incidents did take place such as the killing in Duliajan of an official of the Oil India Limited in July 1980. These were considered as by products of the movement.

1. There was considerable variation in terminology and terms such as insurgency, militancy and extremism were freely and interchangeably used in the discussions at the Seminar. Terrorism was less frequently used. No attempt has been made to impose any uniformity in the papers in this volume.

The foreign nationals whom the AASU wanted to disenfranchise and deport were landless Muslim peasants who had illegally entered the state after independence from the erstwhile East Pakistan, or more particularly after 1971 when Bangladesh came into existence. Included among the foreigners were those from Nepal. In their memorandum of 2 February 1980 to the Prime Minister the AASU had set this out clearly:

The problem which is agitating the minds of people of the entire North East Region is a problem of influx of foreigners from neighbouring countries particularly Bangladesh and Nepal. The influx of foreign nationals into Assam is not a recent phenomenon. The problem exists from the days of Independence. The problem has become so alarming that the very existence of the indigenous populations is threatened. But we are determined to preserve our identity, our history, our culture and our heritage in our strive to maintain the ethnic beauty of the people of the North East Region.²

Popular feeling against those from Nepal was less strident and less sustained than that against the Bangladeshi nationals. As later events were to show neither Dispur nor New Delhi were able to appreciate how deeply ingrained was the feeling of the average Assamese against the large-scale settlement and continued migration of outsiders into the state. This is what H N Das calls "mindset", which developed as a consequence of the accumulated grievances under colonial rule.

From the start leaders of Assam's minority community opposed the movement, arguing that there were no illegal immigrants in the state. Hence the movement against foreigners could only be directed against the minority community, by which was meant of course the large numbers of immigrants from the East Bengal districts who had settled in Assam during colonial times or had come after independence. This stand was hardly surprising since the leadership of Assam's Muslim community had long passed into the hands of these long settled immigrants.

2. H K Barpujari, *North East India, Problems, Policies and Prospects*, Guwahati, 1998, Appendix B, 146-154.

Opposition to the movement came from expected quarters too. The state unit of the Indian National Congress, the Indira Gandhi faction commonly called the Congress-I, acutely aware that the immigrant population could be a decisive factor in several constituencies saw no reason to alienate them. In New Delhi Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was equally anxious to install a Congress-I ministry in Assam after the expiry of President's rule, earlier imposed on account of the escalating violence. In February 1983 elections to the state assembly was foisted upon a protesting people. With AASU and the AGSP keeping away from the polls, a section of the leaders already under detention, the result of the elections was predictable enough. On the 27th of that month a Congress - I ministry under Hiteswar Saikia was sworn in.

The elections and its immediate aftermath resulted in the extensive disturbances which was to engulf the state for a considerable period of time. It began with the highly provocative speeches by political leaders who had displayed a lamentable lack of restraint. Emotions ran high and violent incidents were triggered off in Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon districts, culminating in the infamous massacre at Nellie on 18 February. The form these disturbances took is thus described by Assam's highly regarded historian, the late Professor H K Barpujari:

The victims were all sections of the population (and) not confined to a particular section religious, ethnic or linguistic. In some places Assamese were the attackers and the victims both Hindus and Muslims. While in other places immigrant Muslims were the attackers and Assamese (the victims). In several places clashes took place between the various sections of the Assamese themselves. In few places Muslims joined hands with other in attacking their co-religionists. The redeeming feature was that the 'Assamese Muslims stood solidly behind their Hindu brethren setting an excellent example of inter-communal amity, harmony and solidarity'.³

"We just don't know why it precipitated the crisis by going to the polls without solving the foreigner issue" remarked Jaswant

3. *Ibid.*, 65.

Singh, BJP member of Parliament on the government's ill advised policy.⁴ The new Chief Minister, however, claimed to have "controlled the situation". But the legitimacy of his ministry remained questioned and his actions suspect. What the AASU leadership had to say about the Illegal Migration (Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983, the most controversial product of the period, reflects the popular perception:

Tribunals have been formed to legitimise and confirm the foreigners stay in India and not to deport them. We are well aware most of the foreigners live in Char areas. It will be impossible for anyone within 3 Kms of these to complain.⁵

To continue with the broad contours of the political developments in the state, the Hiteswar Saikia ministry came to an end in 1985 after the "Accord" was signed in New Delhi on 15 August by the AASU and the Government of India. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) which the AASU leaders create formed the Government following the next elections, only to be dismissed in November 1990, months before their term was completed. What happened in between set the ground for the militancy that was soon to dominate Assam.

Militancy and Militant Organisations

It should not surprise anyone with a fair knowledge of Assam and its recent history that the AGP ministry should fail to find a solution to the core issue of foreign nationals. The problem was exceedingly complex, opinions even among scholars on its magnitude too divergent and the interests of the various ethnic, religious and political constituents too conflicting to admit of any easy solution. In all this the attitude of the Central Government operating within the narrow confines of party consideration was anything but helpful. The AGP's inexperience of government was compounded, it was said, by corruption and bickering in its top flight. What actually sealed its fate was the ascendancy of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the 'ambivalent' relations between the two.

4. Reported in *India Today*, 15 February 1983.

5. Shekar Gupta, *India Today*, 29 February 1983.

After April 1979 when it was established in Sibsagar the ULFA had been responsible for several acts of terrorist violence. By the closing months of the eighties it had become a power to be reckoned with in the Brahmaputra valley, enjoying a reputation as a ruthless outfit and at the same time a benevolent image of a modern Robin Hood.⁶

It would perhaps be rather simplistic to attribute the rise of the ULFA solely to the AGP government and its failure to realise the people's expectations. "In reality" says Professor Barpujari in his study quoted above, "it was an expression of opposition to the more than hundred years of exploitation by the colonial rulers and Indian Government".⁷ A former governor of the state, Lieutenant General (Retd.) S K Sinha has surprisingly much the same to say. As he told a seminar in New Delhi.

There is no denying the fact that insurgency erupted in Assam and that the people were carried away by the secessionist propaganda. On analysis, I find this happened largely because of a feeling of popular neglect and discrimination and not

6. A popular journal could thus write approvingly of its activities as late as in 1990: "There are no longer illicit liquor business, no prostitution and no trace of drug trafficking. For this the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) an underground organisation which is busy in conducting operation to clean society are responsible.

"So far they have killed 50 people from all over the states (sic). The people were regarded as anti-social elements and linked with various illicit businesses from drugs to supply of women. It is notable that in almost all the killings the ULFA claimed responsibility and issued a press release stating the reasons leading to the murder.

"Using fully automatic gear the ULFA are bang on target. They are also swift. The other day the ULFA gave a press release to the newsroom in which they described Ram Prakash Tiwari as an anti-social element and sentenced him to death. A few minutes later a telephone call from the Police said that "Ram Prakash Tiwari had been shot dead in his house by the ULFA". Mrinal Talukdar from Dibrugarh and Jorhat, *North East Sun*, xiii,28, 10 February 1990. For an account of the emergence of the ULFA, see Samir Kumar Das. *ULFA. United Liberation Front of Assam. A Political Analysis*, Delhi, 1994

7. Barpujari, *op cit.* 79.

because of ethnic, cultural or historical differences. This is the critical difference between the insurgency in Assam and the other insurgencies in (the hill) tribal areas.⁸

The opening paper in this collection, that by J B Bhattacharjee, places neglect at the door of the Central Government, primarily their failure to check infiltration and take up the issue of support to Assam's militants by certain unfriendly neighbouring countries. Successive state governments on their part "contributed to the disappointment and frustration of the youths who joined the ranks of the militants". His elemental argument is that Assam's colonial past, and the legacy of that past, begs a closer look before militancy or conflict can be addressed. Apurba Baruah uses the same historical framework to suggest that the roots of conflict can be intelligible "only if we understand the nature of *Asomiya* nationalism and its response to the aspirations of other communities inhabiting the state of Assam". Baruah's construction of nationality brings out the two dimensions of militancy that violence as a common method often tends to blur. One of course is the movement avowedly against the Union of India and aims at an independent and sovereign Assam; the other merely seeking greater local autonomy, or even a separate state, within ethnic boundaries. That the aspirations of the nationalities or communities, small or big, should not be construed as anti-national has been emphasised in the papers, that follow. A few words on recent developments will perhaps be in order.

That the anti-foreigner movement had itself unleashed forces beyond the capacity of the young men at the helm of state politics to handle cannot be gainsaid. The February 1980 AASU memorandum to the Prime Minister had drawn attention to the effects of the "silent invasion" upon the plains tribal population – that all the 33 blocks and belts reserved for them were on the verge of extinction, forest resources were fast disappearing owing to indiscriminate felling of trees, and the occupation by foreign nationals of their lands:

8. S K Sinha "Violence and Hope in India's North East". In K P S Gill and Ajai Sahni, *Fault-lines. Writings on conflict and resolution*. 10, New Delhi, 2002. 1-21.

The very identity of the tribal population is in danger of extinction. The recent history of Tripura provides a good example to substantiate our belief. People of Assam cannot afford to ignore the warnings.⁹

The camaraderie between the AGP and the tribals proved shortlived. The AGP's construction of the Assamese identity, or nationality as several contributors call it, contained the seeds of alienation. The new language policy making the knowledge of Assamese mandatory for service under the government marked the beginning of the parting of ways with the Boros. What the latter told the Prime Minister in 1987 shows how quickly this alienation turned to hostility: "the present leaders of Assam make no secret their determination to wipe out the distinct language, culture and tradition." Assam's youthful leadership certainly proved inept and failed to gauge the Boro mind. But their inability to assuage the feelings of the Boro leadership was further aggravated by the Central governments attempts to use the Boros to destabilise the AGP Government.¹⁰

Hiteshwar Saikia's second ministry which took office in 1991 could bring no permanent solution to the Boro problem. The Accord of February 1993 which conceded to them their own autonomous area, was followed within three years by violence in the Boro dominated areas. The Boro Security Force became particularly restive from May 1996 when they began to target the *adivasis* in an effort to make the Boroland Autonomous Council area ethnically more homogenous. The Boros were unfortunately divided and this continued division of their organisation into several factions was helpful neither to the Government nor to the Boros themselves. The attempt of the Boro Security Force, which had now metamorphosed into the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), to bring some unity among the different groups met with little success. Indeed, that very year NDFB found itself pitted against another rival formation, the Boro Liberation Tiger Force.

9. *Supra*, n 1,

10. See Ferzand Ahmed, "Assam: A Bloody Price," *India Today*, 15 September, 1989 and M S Prabhakar, "A Clandestine Outfit", *Frontline*, quoted in Barpujari, *op cit*, 78

In Karbi Anglong the situation rapidly changed when the Karbi National Volunteers, formed in March 1995, began their so called liberation struggle. At the same time in the adjoining North Cachar Hills demands for a separate state began to gain ground after the Dima Haram Dauga (DHD) was formed. The floodgate to such extreme demands which was opened by the Reorganisation of North-East India in 1972 was to get a further fillip by the unsolicited offer of local autonomy to every ethnic group by the Hiteswar Saikia Government. Two papers deal with issues connected with these developments.

Unlike Baruah who clearly recognises the separate identity of the various small nationalities, Hemanta Barman sees them as constituents of a larger Assamese society. He explains their demands over the last two decades for recognition as a distinct ethnic group, the term he uses rather than smaller nationalities which Baruah and others use, as a reaction to their "suppression" by the Assamese middle class. Gurudas Das draws attention to the consequences of the attempts of the Assamese to turn poly-ethnic Assam into a homogenised "nation-province". More than the failure of that attempt was the alarm it caused to the different ethnic or tribal groups which he feels is responsible for the conflict situation in Assam. Das sounds a note of caution that if efforts by the Assamese in this direction continues it would be at the cost of Assam's territorial integrity.

As Assam stepped into the new century peace seemed as remote as it ever was. Hiteswar Saikia's much trumpeted surrenders of ULFA cadres introduced a new element in the disruption of the economic and political fabric of the state. These surrendered ULFA, or SULFA as they came to be known, whose past the Government chose to ignore and who were given loans on easy terms as part of their rehabilitation programme turned into Assam's mafia.¹¹

Civil Society

The "militarisation" of the state had received considerable attention at the seminar if only because of its implications on civil

11. See for example, Ajai Sahni and Bibhu Prasad Routray, "SULFA: Terror by Another Name" in KPS Gill and Ajai Sahni, *Faultlines*, 9, 1 - 38

society. ULFA's activities in the first years of the Accord, now well documented, from the series of kidnappings or killings of government officials, businessmen and individuals to massive extortion from traders and business concerns, particularly the tea companies, reached such proportions that the organisation was banned in November 1990 and operations were handed over to the army. Operation Bajrang, and Operation Rhino which followed in September 1991, were not without success. It had the effect of breaking the ULFA into two. The hard core leaders who refused to abandon their demands for "Swadhin" or independent Assam found sanctuaries outside India's borders. While those who surrendered were rehabilitated but the failure of the political leadership to follow up the successful operations undid much of the work of the army.

The continued violence led the Government of India to create the Unified Command for combined army and police operations under the GOC 4 Corps. Civilian supremacy over the command was theoretically maintained, to overcome Assam's objections, by conceding its presiding functions to the state Chief Secretary as its Chairman. How the military viewed insurgency can be seen from the assessment of the command's achievements by the Governor, Lieutenant General Sinha:

We could not have the kind of unity of command that General Sir Gerald Templer established in Malaya, but the Unified Command was the closest we could achieve and it worked. There were hiccups, but these were resolved. The result was that *we were able to kill more than a thousand militants in encounters, we recovered three thousand weapons and a large amount of cash, and over three thousand three hundred militants surrendered in batches. (emphasis added)*¹²

12. S K Sinha *op cit*, 18. For General Sinha's views on unified commands, see "Counter Insurgency Operations" (written in 1970) in his *Of Matters Military*, New Delhi 1980, 162 - 177, in which he writes, "When insurgency erupts the Government must inevitably use its army to combat it. Democratic Governments are generally haunted by the fear of the ghost of Oliver Cromwell stalking in the portals of power. There is, therefore, an understandable hesitation to hand over the problem to the Army. Apart from this, it is obvious that the Army by itself cannot deal with Insurgency and it will be
(cont.)

Such notions of the objective or methods of counter-insurgency operations seem to be held by lower formations of the army. In February 1998, for instance, army sources reported and was duly broadcast by the Guwahati Doordarshan on the 14th that a "major breakthrough" had been achieved in Tamulpur where a district commander of the BLTF was shot dead. It was added that the army patrol found the BLTF group resting in a hut, and killed three while they were sleeping and had no chance to retaliate!¹³

Assam's past history in this connection is worth recalling. It used to be the proud claim of every head of police not very long ago, that of all provinces in India Assam enjoyed an enviably low crime rate and the people were among the most peaceful. One head of administration in the late nineteenth century even declined to have anything more than an armed civil police for the internal security of the province: "there is no reason why with a gentle and peaceful population like the Assamese a more warlike instrument should be

(contd. . . .)

wrong to advocate the supervision of the civil government. Imposition of martial law may be tried as a temporary expedient in a specific area but in the long run it is unlikely to liquidate insurgency. At the end of the scale is the mistake notion that the Army should conduct counter insurgency operations as aid to the civil power. The technique of dispersal of unlawful assemblies with minimum force cannot be adopted to warfare of this type. The solution in this regard lies in the setting up of an integrated Civil and Army organisation at all levels to deal with the problem in a joint and co-ordinated manner. The Malayalam example provides a classic pattern for such an organisation." For an account of the British campaign in Malaya, see Edgar O' Balance, *Malaya: the Communist Insurgent War, 1948 - 60*, London, 1966.

13. English news from Guwahati Doordarshan, 7.00 p.m. Saturday 14 February 1998. Even political leaders refer to casualty in militant ranks to publicise success of counter-insurgency operations. Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta for instance told the press in January 2000 that since May 1996, 600 ultras were killed and 500 held. *The Shillong Times*, Monday 24 January 2000. *The Telegraph*, North East Supplement, Guwahati 21 May 2001, justifying the retention of army in Assam, reported: "How effective the Unified Command has been can be gauged from the fact that as many as 988 rebels had been killed between January 1997 and April 2001 as compared to 165 militants killed during Operation Bajrang and Rhino between 1990 and 1996".

required", he had declared.¹⁴ The colonial army shared this view. The Commander-in-Chief Lord Kitchener's military reform and mobilisation scheme of 1905 - 06 did not envisage any permanent garrison east of Bengal. Rather, some years later the Assam Brigade was moved out of the province and until the Second World War Assam was no more than a sub-area of the Presidency Command. Where once three Indian infantry battalions sufficed to enforce *Pax Britannica* in Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, these is now spread over the region a staggering military presence far larger than the Allied build up during 1942-45 for the defence of Eastern India and the recovery of Burma.

It can be argued that Assam Police itself had undergone a process of militarisation. The old style policing revolving around the *thana*, the beat and inspections had given away to commando operations and "jungle warfare" as the more dominant police functions¹⁵. In April 1995 the Director General told reporters that Assam Police was raising its first "elite" commando battalion to be trained by the National Security Guard and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police to combat separatist guerrillas and other militants in the state.¹⁶ A

14. Note by Chief Commissioner, Charles Alfred Elliott, 20 January 1882, in Alexander MacKenzie, *A History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Benga*, Calcutta 1884, App F, 506

15. Interestingly, the Assam Rifles lost its unique character for policing frontier and tribal territories on account of its coming under the operational command of the military and working alongside Indian army formations in the Second World War. The Assam Governor's Advisor for Tribal Affairs James Phillip Mills was perceptive enough to notice this in a report in 1944: "The Assam Rifles performed their most adequately. But it is impossible to resist the feeling that the militarisation of the force, inevitable though it is at the present time, does not increase its suitability for the duties it has to perform on the North East Frontier. The Assam Rifles Manual does not visualise a force indistinguishable from a unit of the Indian army". *A Brief General Report on the North East Frontier Agency for the period 23 October 1943 to 30 June 1944*, India office Records, L/P&S/12/3114, Call 22/4; the British Library, London.

16. Reported in the *Asian Age*, Supplement, Eastern Age, 27 April 1995, also *North East Times*, Monday 22 May 1995 for interview with the Director General of Police, Assam; Comments in the *Meghalaya Guardian*, Wednesday 24 May 1995. See Editorial, "Can the Assam Police do it?"

"massive modernisation" drive was underway, the antiquated .303 rifles were being phased out, to be replaced eventually by AK 47 assault rifles. This was how he had explained the need to rearm his men: "The idea of bringing in sophisticated weaponry is that our police force should be able to match the firepower of the rebels."¹⁷

The militarisation of the state has naturally adversely impacted upon the everyday life of the ordinary citizen. The elaborate personal security arrangements of the political leadership and sadly of even the bureaucracy including the police itself, has swallowed up the greater portion of the (then) 60,000 strong Assam Police. The commandoes raised and trained to fight militants have been diverted to what is commonly called VIP security. While politicians and public servants thus cocooned themselves in protective mesh the common citizen was left exposed to extortion and violence. Detection and prevention of crime or traffic control with which he is immediately concerned had become the first casualty. Social scientists have generally been voicing concern over the excessive use of force. Sanjib Baruah, for example, had noted three year's earlier:

The State's response to the ULFA has been more militarist than political. The Indian army and paramilitary forces have been employed to deal with the challenge, and in the process extreme authorisation methods have been introduced in the fabric of ordinary life, especially in those parts of Assam that are seen as ULFA strongholds.¹⁸

Not surprisingly therefore that this subject should occupy a prominent place in the Seminar discussions.

Sanjay Borbora's paper presented on behalf of the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samity, provides the critique of militarisation. "The outcome of the process of militarisation can be put before discerning audiences", he says, "as a history of using military power

17. *Ibid* None will dispute the need for technological parity, but this was a clear enough signal to the militants that Assam Police was no match against them so far as its training and arms were concerned.

18. Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, New Delhi 1999, 144.

to tackle political problems.” He finds no evidence of the State encouraging a “healthy debate” on its myriad problems, rather there is a propensity to use force much in the way the colonial state had earlier done. His view that “militarism is the primary factor that leads to the diminishing of social space for the resolution of people’s aspirations” is shared by several other contributors. Udayon Mishra, taking both State and militant actions together says in his opening statement: “One of the most significant fallouts of state and militant violence that has hit Assam for the past twenty years or so has been the growing marginalisation of the average citizen. Caught between the violence let loose by those who represent the state and those who wish to break it, civil society has been increasingly loosing its voice and this, naturally, is a matter of grave concern”. The case for civil society “intervention”, Misra’s central theme, is taken up by Monirul Hussain, who argues the need to identify, *inter alia*, civil society as a major actor in the peace resolution process.¹⁹ An interesting dimension to this, the relevance of cultural space, is suggested by Sajal Nag. Its relative unimportance, even in normal circumstances, will be borne out by the position the concerned administrative department occupies in the hierarchy of government. What seems even more surprising is the virtual absence of any significant involvement of women in the peace process, in spite of Assam’s unique historical experience. This was Paula Banerjee’s submission: that in “any discourse on possibilities of peace it becomes essential to include women as participants”.

Economic Development

Assam’s neglect and discrimination against her by the Central Government, was forcefully expressed at the Guwahati seminar and this theme is spread over in several of the collections in this volume. Apurba Baruah likens Assam to that of an “internal colony”. Assam’s relative economic backwardness and the absence of any significant development over the past decades is generally acknowledged by all contributors. H. N. Das draws on data derived from surveys to

19. For persistence of these suggestions see Samir Kumar Das, “Ethnic Conflicts and Internal Security: a Plea for Reconstructing Civil Society in Assam”, in K P S Gill and Ajai Sahni, *Faultlines, op cit*, 37 ff.

show that since 1993 poverty has been on the increase rather than on the decline and the economic growth has been much slower in Assam than in the rest of the country. This has been aggravated by the spurt in the growth of population, largely immigrant. Whether or not Assam's economic condition is due to the neglect by the Government of India is of course an issue that will continue to be a subject of considerable debate.²⁰

The concern of the seminar had been about the dangers of a stagnant economy, which R Gopalakrishnan points out can prove to be conducive for discontented elements within the society to revive the "dormant fissiparous tendencies and encourage the formation of an insurgent situation in the state". The most valuable part of Das' analysis particularly in regard to the seminar problem, was the interface between insurgency and development. Though he finds no direct link between the two, his conclusion remains unequivocal: "economic backwardness is one of the causes of the insurgency in Assam" and the "Assamese mindset (which) developed during the past two centuries has added fuel to it". His comments, coming from a distinguished civil servant and a former Chief Secretary to Government, on the "stumbling block" to development needs to be acted upon. R Gopalakrishnan on the other hand emphasises the importance of peace in economic development is to be achieved. For this he brings to notice advances in peace research. Like

20 See for example, Ajai Sahni and J. George, "Security and Development in India's North-East: An Alternative Perspective" in K.P.S.Gill and Ajai Sahni, *Faultlines. Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, Vol. 4, New Delhi, February 2000, 43-67. The two authors thus write, "The States of the North-East are ascribed 'Special Category' status by the Government of India, and the National Development Council (NDC), the apex body for the approval of Plan funding, earmarks 30 percent of that Plan allocations for Special Category Status as Central assistance for State Plans. Significantly, these States receive 90 percent of Plan assistance for grant, and just 10 percent as loan, as against the norm of 30 percent grant and 70 percent loan for other States. Favoured Treatment is also given by the Finance Commission with respect to sharing Central tax revenues. Clearly, therefore, these States have not been made to suffer as a result of their resource endowments". For the so called underground economy Ajai Sahni "The Terrorist Economy in India's Northeast: Preliminary Explorations" in *Faultlines*, 8, 127-148.

H. N. Das and others he too points out the importance of civil society in the developmental process

The Seminar's concern for the economic development of the state was much deeper than the number of presentations on the subject would suggest. This was in fact underscored in the Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi's inaugural address that economic backwardness was the prime cause that bred insurgency in Assam, and "once the economy started striding upward, the problem of insurgency would automatically move to the back seat." This would seem rather simplistic, but state Home Minister Prodyut Bordoloi had said that interrogation of the surrendered militants revealed "that it was the economic causes that drove them to join in extremist forces rather than any attraction towards secessionist ideology".

Jaideep Saikia's somewhat personalised account of the problem in Assam and that by Mamang Dai drawing attention to what could happen to Arunachal Pradesh if on concern continues round off the collection.

The Guwahati Declaration

Each of the papers contain suggestions for restoring peace. These can be divided broadly into three: (i) the need for accelerated economic development of the state (ii) recognition of the rights and aspirations of smaller ethnic groups and ensuring a constant dialogue between them and the larger civil society, and (iii) the demilitarisation of the state. That all this can be achieved only if violence ends and a semblance of peace is restored to the State was recognised by the Seminar. At the conclusion of the deliberations the seminar agreed:

to adopt a resolution for peace in Assam and calls upon the Government of India and Assam, the ULFA and the NDFB to respect the wishes of the people of Assam and without further ado abjure all forms of violence and immediately come to the negotiating table. It also collectively calls upon the Government of India to take concrete steps to withdraw the India army from the state of Assam in order to usher in an atmosphere which will be conducive for dialogue with the various militant organisations.

It also calls upon the people of Assam to steadfastly support such an initiative and prevail upon the various parties to sit in dialogue and conclude the desirable cessation of hostilities by all concerned in order to prepare a conducive ground for a negotiated settlement.

The seminar therefore enjoined upon the rest of India to understand Assam's ailments – heir for over five decades – and collectively contribute their mite to the healing process. Indeed, it concluded, India cannot exist without Assam as certainly as Assam will not exist without India.²¹

21. Press Release issued by the ICSSR – NERC after due deliberation by the participants of the seminar on 30 August 2001.

1

Understanding Conflicts: Towards a Resolution

J. B. BHATTACHARJEE

Understanding the nature of a conflict historically and to spot its roots should precede any attempt towards its long-term resolution. The elimination of a root of the conflict is more important than negotiating with the conflict as a problem of peace. The administrative and political measures (or even the arms of the men in uniform) can provide only a temporary solution and the problem is bound to resurface (and every time with more vengeance) unless its root is extricated. In case of Assam (and for that matter, Northeast India) this applied content of history assumes a special significance in the context of the colonial hangover of ethnic and linguistic conflicts. To suggest some measures to resolve the on-going conflicts in Assam, which has eventually culminated in insurgency for at least two decades now, social scientists are required to analyze the historical and social roots of the conflicts. The resolution of the conflicts is a precondition for the peace to dawn in the region, and for the conflict resolution, it is essential to understand the origin and nature of the conflict itself. A problem can never be resolved unless its root is identified and eliminated, and to find the root one has to go to history.

The causes of the conflicts in Assam are to be found in the geography and history of Assam, which was created by the British

as a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual polyglot frontier province to promote their colonial interests. It consisted of hills and plains and the disparate ethnic and linguistic areas, in which the respective communities had maintained their own identities in the pre-colonial period. The geographical remoteness and inaccessibility and the historical isolation and traditional autonomy of the various communities in their respective areas in the pre-colonial phase of history had contributed to the growth of certain pride and prejudices which it was not easy to demolish by mere political annexation to the British Indian colonial state. No wonder, colonial rule not only failed to break the isolation but also strengthened the barriers by its segregating policies.¹ On the other hand, the British created a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual polyglot province of Assam to include the traditional Assamese area, the hills and some Bengali-speaking districts. It was done in two stages; first, when the former Ahom kingdom was annexed in 1826 an administrative division called 'Assam' was created in Bengal under a Commissioner and the hill areas, bordering on the Brahmaputra Valley, were added to this division by phases, as and when those were annexed in parts, and secondly, Assam Division was separated from Bengal and upgraded to the status of a Province under a Chief Commissioner in 1874 to include not only the districts within the Assam Commissionership but also the Goalpara district of the erstwhile Cooch Behar Division, Cachar and Sylhet districts from Dacca Division, and later the Lushai Hills.² These areas were not only geographically and ethno-linguistically disparate regions; most of them had hardly experienced the sharing of larger political formations. S K Bhuyan has shown through a map that the Ahom state at the time of the British annexation was limited to the Brahmaputra Valley and even in the Brahmaputra Valley, the patches of land in the foothill areas in northern, eastern and southern portions of the Valley were included in the adjoining hill tribal territories. The same map also shows that a section of the Lower Assam (Goalpara area) was then included

-
1. Non-Regulated System, the Scheduled Districts Act, Inner Line Regulations, Frontier Tracts Regulation are examples of the policies followed by the British.
 2. H K Barpujari (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol. iv, Guwahati, 1992, pp. 28-31; A K Neogy, *The Partitions of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1984, 36-49.

in Bengal.³ In fact, Goalpara was a part of the Rangpur district of Bengal at the time of British conquest of the province. Three *thanahs* of Rangpur, viz. Dhubri, Karabari and Goalpara were separated from the Rangpur district in 1818 and made into a new division, called North-East Rangpur, under a Civil Commissioner to deal with the problem of law and order in the Garo frontier. Subsequently, it was managed by a Political Agent under the administrative control of the Commissioner of Cooch Behar, and was eventually transferred to Assam.⁴ This was the province of Assam created by the British in 1874. It included areas which were ethnically and linguistically disparate, hardly one-fourth of the geographical area was Assamese-speaking and the Assamese population was less than one-third of the total population of the province. The various tribal groups, Assamese and the Bengalees were indigenous in their respective areas. In fact, till the end of the British rule the Bengalees were more in number than the Assamese in the province of Assam.⁵ Yet, the British named it 'Assam' and thus planted the seed of discord between the communities in future.

The British annexation was followed by a steady increase of population, particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley (Assam proper). According to Historian H K Barpujari, "The steady growth in population ... was due to natural growth under settled conditions and mainly to the influx of outsiders: Nearly 65 percent of Bengal, 14 percent from the United Provinces, and 10.8 percent from the Central Provinces. Like the ancient Greeks who called all non-Greeks *Barbarians*, the Assamese had termed all foreigners as *Bangals* whether Europeans or the inhabitants of Bengal proper."⁶ This influx of population had occurred in the areas which formed part of the erstwhile Ahom kingdom or Assam proper and it began before the creation of the province of Assam in 1874. The process continued, rather became more intensified, after 1874, as a genuine

3. S K Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, Gauhati, 1949, See map in the beginning of the volume.

4. *ibid*; J B Bhattacharjee, *The Garos and the English*, New Delhi, 1977, 44-76.

5. Census of India, 1931, Part I (Assam).

6. H K Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company*, Gauhati, 1963, 293.

concern for the emerging Assamese middle class. A small number of Muslims and Sikhs had already settled in those areas towards the end of the Ahom rule, while the Marwaris made their appearance immediately with the British occupation and established their control over the trade. The number in all cases augmented over the years. As Barpujari said with reference to the pre-1874 phase, "The newcomers from the neighbouring districts of Bengal were not only the most numerous, but they exerted considerable influence on the social, economic and cultural life of the Assamese."⁷ To further quote him:

It was not until the restoration of normal life after British occupation when there also opened up avenues of employment in office and in trade, the influx of population from the neighbouring districts of Bengal viz. Sylhet, Dacca, Mymensing and Rangpur may be said to have actually begun. Already trained in the art of administration of the Company, the *amlahs* of Bengal replaced the earlier official aristocracy when the latter proved themselves incapable of properly discharging the duties that were entrusted to them. Few of the new recruits knew English or Persian which was then the court language of the Presidency. In April, 1831, the Government of Bengal made Bengali in place of Persian the court language of Assam on the ground that it was very difficult and too costly to have replacements when a Persian scribe was on leave or left the service. When the newcomers were thus enabled to make the revenue and judicial departments more or less their sole preserve, it became easier on their part to oust the local officials whenever there occurred cases of default or defalcation. Their services became indispensable in almost all the Government schools, whether Anglo-Vernacular or Vernacular, since local teachers were not available in adequate numbers, in any case, to impart lessons in Bengali which had since become the medium of instruction.⁸

The introduction of Bengali in place of Persian in courts, and gradually as the medium of instructions in the Anglo-Vernacular

7 *ibid*, 292.

8 *ibid*, 297-8.

and Vernacular schools, in the Bengal Presidency as a whole, of which Assam was then a part, by the then British Government was construed by many as an act of the Bengalees and to the detriment of the Assamese. As Barpujari said, "The virtual monopoly of office in almost all the departments by the immigrants from Bengal generated an ill-feeling and deep resentment amongst those for whom hitherto there was no other means of livelihood than Government service. Their feelings were, to a great extent, shared by their sympathisers and followers, and must have been accentuated during the years of administrative confusion when it was generally held that *amlahs* were at the root of all the evils."⁹ A section of the British officials themselves mindlessly started a polemic by raising a question, whether or not Assamese was an independent language.¹⁰ To make matters worse, a section of the *amlahs* submitted a memorandum during the visit of A J M Mills arguing that Bengali and the Assamese was basically one language. Many, in later years, suggested that the introduction of Bengali was a 'Bengalee conspiracy' and quoted this memorandum. It was overlooked that the *amlahs* were no representatives of the Bengalee community and it was definitely to the professional advantage of those *amlahs* that the official transactions were conducted in their language. As Barpujari rightly said,

It must also be clearly understood that the *amlahs* were not the true representatives of the people of Bengal. It will not be far from the truth to say that at the beginning most of the newcomers were mere fortune-seekers, and in due course many of them settled down permanently and linked themselves with the people of the soil. Better facilities of transport and communication in the meantime encouraged a few Assamese to proceed to the Presidency in pursuit of trade and higher education which enabled them to have a correct picture of the Bengalees. Contacts like these, though slowly, not only removed much of their mutual prejudices and ill-feelings, but tended towards a process of assimilation which made itself apparent, particularly amongst the high caste Hindus, in the observance

9. *ibid*, 298.

10. *ibid*, 298-312.

of their common festivals and religious ceremonies, in their dresses, customs and usages.¹¹

He further said,

Not merely the *amlahs* of Bengal, almost all the officials, high or low, Assamese and non-Assamese, never failed to exploit the situation as best as they could whenever an opportunity presented itself whether under early British rule or during the short regime of Raja Purandar in Upper Assam.¹²

11. *ibid*, 299.

“While the Bengali-speaking Muslim has assured a place for himself a berth in the Assamese community as neo-Assamese, the Bengali Hindu’s position vis-a-vis the Assamese community has gone through several ups and downs through a tortuous process. Historically speaking, the absorption of this section of migrants into the Assamese community had begun during the middle period of Ahom rule. Long looked upon by the Assamese as a threat to their cultural-linguistic identity, the Bengali Hindu’s absorption into the Assamese nationality had begun during the middle period of Ahom rule. So much so, that many of the leading caste-Hindu Assamese families to today had not too distant Bengali links and antecedents. There is no doubt that geographical factors did play a leading role in helping such a process of assimilation. But, the entire scenario of Assamese-Bengali Hindu relationship swiftly changed with the coming of the British. Not only did this process of assimilation of Bengali Hindus into the Assamese community come to a halt even as communication routes improved and it became easier for them to retain links with their home region as also to nourish their own cultural and linguistic roots, but certain sections of the Bengali Hindu middle class leadership attempted to establish Bengali hegemony in the state and was supported in this by a section of the intelligentsia of Bengal. The replacement of Assamese by Bengali in the early years of British rule, the struggle for the restoration of the status of the Assamese language led by Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan and strongly supported by the American Baptists as well as by Bengali scholars like R C Dutt, the competition for the jobs between the well-developed and well-entrenched Bengali middle class and its newly emerging Assamese counterpart, the belligerent stance adopted against the Assamese language by a section of the Bengali Hindus in the Brahmaputra Valley and the support they received from a largely partisan Calcutta press, as reflected in the debate on the pages of *Mrinmayee*, *Bharati* and *Prabasi*, are but a few of the well-known historical reasons for the antagonism that has been existing between these two communities, - an antagonism that seems to have largely shaped Assam and Assamese politics in the decades immediately preceding and following independence.” Udayon Misra, *The Transformation of Assamese Identity : A Historical Survey*, NEHA, Shillong, 2001, 48-49.

12. *ibid*.

2

Roots of Conflict*

APURBA K. BARUAH

We believe the conflict situation that prevails in Assam today, involving communal tensions, separatist tendencies and the political instability, can be understood only if we understand the nature of *Asomiya* nationalism and its responses to the aspiration of the other communities inhabiting the state of Assam. In this context, it is important to remember that *Asomiya* nationalism took shape at a time when Indian Sub-continent was experiencing a mass movement against British rule. This movement did influence the formation of national consciousness among, the smaller nationalities of India. We have argued elsewhere that the attitudes of the patrons of Indian nationalism have greatly affected the process of development of national consciousness of the smaller nationalities of India the like the *Asomiya*.

It is not difficult to demonstrate that nationalism in any land develops under the patronage of the most dominant class or classes of the area. These forces make use of nationalism to protect their own interest but since most successful ruling classes rule with the help of what Gramsci called hegemony¹ and since such hegemony

* The arguments incorporated in this paper were presented in the University of Madras as Bhaktavatsalam endowment lecture in 2002.

1. For a discussion on this point see, A.K. Baruah, 'Middle Class Hegemony and the The National Question in Assam' in Milton Sangma (ed.) *Essays On North-East India*, (Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1994) 242-277.

is not possible without mobilising the consent of the subordinate classes it becomes necessary for all dominant classes aspiring to exercise hegemony to articulate at least some interest of the strata below them. Articulation of 'national' interest by dominant classes or aspirants of such domination often seem to fulfil this requirement because 'national interest' is defined by their propagators as interest of the entire community and the cultural, economic and political demands embraced by such interest are publicised as demands for the entire community. It is true that the concept of hegemony is usually connected with the ruling classes but as Manorama Sharma has shown there exists a concept of political hegemony even in the case of non-ruling classes in Gramsci himself.² If we look at the multi-cultural or poly-ethnic countries like India and specially at the processes of formation of national consciousness of the big and also of small nationalities in such countries we come to realise that the exercise of hegemony by advanced sections of the respective communities does influence the issues connected with nationality question. The struggles of the smaller nationalities, the response of the Indian state to such struggles and the resultant political crisis can be understood much better if we adopt the approach indicated above.

In the hey days of Indian nationalism, when the Indian bourgeoisie and the middle classes mainly belonging to the Brahminical tradition³ led the struggle against British imperialism, the middle classes, and sometimes even nascent regional bourgeoisie, of the small nationalities accepted the ideology of Indian nationalism but even at that point of Indian history these nationalities never forgot their own identities. As we have shown in a discussion of the ideas of Ambikagiri Roy Chaudhury, Assamese for instance, were worried about their own identity.⁴ So were Bengalis and Oriyas.

2. Manorama Sharma, *Social and Economic Change in Assam: Middle Class Hegemony*, (Delhi, 1990), 147-149.

3. For a discussion on this tradition see, A.K. Baruah, *Middle Class Hegemony*, *op. cit.*, and Gail Omvedt "National Integration and National Culture in India" in: K.M. Deka, (Ed.), *Nationalism and Regionalism in North-East India*, (Dibrugarh, 1985), 17-21.

4. A.K. Baruah, 'Assamese Nationalist Thought: An Analysis of Some Ideas of Ambikagiri' in Baruah *op. cit.*

The reasons behind this is not difficult to understand. Each of these smaller cultural units has a personality of its own.⁵

In the post independence period the path of development, which began under British, perpetuated uneven development but at the same time led to the emergence of new social forces like regional bourgeoisie, middle classes, and educated elites. Since some non-indigenous communities are already dominant in the areas perceived by small nationalities as their own homeland, these new forces enter into a situation of unequal competition. It is then that they began to mobilise their own societies under the banner of nationalism. The protagonists of Indian nationalism were able to advance their cause by mobilising the Indian masses against British imperialism. The newly emerging western educated elites were at the forefront of that struggle. In the same way the educated elites of the small nationalities are now launching a series of struggles against their perceived enemies. Since almost all small nationalities view the intolerant and expansionist tendencies of Indian Nationalism of the Hindi-Hindu-Brahminical variety as a threat to their cultural identity and also have genuine grievances against the relatively advanced communities occupying dominant position at a regional level, this battle is, therefore being fought at two different levels. But because of the urgency of the situation the battle at the regional level becomes more important and the resistance against the expansionism of Indian nationalism does not become very powerful. The liberal democratic process initiated during the British rule and carried on after independence has of course created a fellow feeling among Indians, even if only politically. This feeling embraces even those communities who are not a part of the traditional Indian Culture in any sense. The political integration of these culturally non-Indian communities has been taking place mainly through their newly emerging educated elites who while getting integrated in the political process harp on the theme of separate cultural identities. It is interesting to note that it is their assertion of separate cultural identity which very often enables them to acquire considerable political power. But the compulsions of participating in the liberal democratic politics of the state of India make them accept the political reality of this state.

5. Nihar Ranjan Ray, *Nationalism in India*, (Aligarh 1973). 28-29.

Since the mainstream politicians use the term nation to refer even to the state of India these groups also use the term nation though they actually mean the state. For instance, the Congress (I) in Meghalaya calls itself a national party with a regional outlook and Hill Peoples Union calls itself a regional party with a national outlook. Their attitude to the Hindi language is also intriguing. Because of the compulsions of the market, Hindi has become almost a *lingua franca* even in these areas. But at the same time the elites of these communities jealously promote the cause of their own languages. It is interesting to note that even those groups who have demanded secession at some point of time are gradually beginning to accept the reality of the Indian state.⁶ But such conversions need not necessarily imply that they have come under the fold of Indian nationalism. As we have argued above many small nationalities do distinguish between the state of India and Indian nationalism. Attempts at integrating the various communities at the cultural level under the banner of Indian nationalism will continue to be resisted by the small nationalities. Thus, while the emergence of new social forces at the regional level generates conditions for strengthening the nationalist politics of the smaller nationalities, the expansionist trend of 'Indian nationalism' and its attempt at identifying the state of India as embodiment of this nationalism give tremendous boost to the process of mobilisation of the smaller nationalities. Each linguistic community in which a viable educated elite has emerged is claiming the status of a nationality, primarily at the persuasion of such elites. More and more linguistic communities of India are staking their claims as nationalities under the leadership of newly emerging educated elites. This has created a very complex situation because the so-called Indian mainstream has been taking a very intolerant attitude towards these nationalities in India. However, what is important for our purpose here is to realise that the aspirations of the small nationalities and problems created by these aspirations must be understood only in the context of the character of the social forces that articulate these aspirations.

6. Secessionist Organisations of Mizos and Tamils have now accepted the reality of the state of India. Quite a large section of Naga insurgents has also given up the demand for secession.

If we try to examine the *Asomiya* national question in the context of the above we have to try and understand the historical background of this nationalism and its patrons. Prior to the British conquest in 1826, Assam was politically outside all the great empires that were established in the Indian sub-continent. Before the treaty of Yandabo a large area of the Brahmaputra valley was ruled for six hundred years by the Ahoms. Though the boundaries of the Ahom state kept changing from time to time they managed to keep control over the major portions of the Brahmaputra valley. Despite fourteen major attacks by Mughals this area could never be politically integrated with the rest of India till the coming of the British. But culturally this valley had very close cultural links with the north Indian Hindu tradition. Assamese is the only Indo-Aryan language,⁷ in this region. Moreover, there is considerable amount of evidence to show that the various kingdoms that existed on the banks of Brahmaputra had cultural interactions with north India.⁸ It is of course well-known that the earliest inhabitants of Assam were speakers of the Indo-Chinese language of the Mon Khmer family, identified very often as the Austric family of languages.⁹ It is rather difficult to say how much these people contributed to the growth of the *Asomiya* as a distinct community but their culture survives in many existing institutions of the Assamese people. Names of many places and rivers bear witness to their influence. The next batch of early migrants into this area were the peoples speaking Tibeto-Burman languages. While the various groups of these migrants spread over the southern Assam the most important group of the tribe of the Tibeto-Burman origin known as *Bodo* came to form the numerous and important sections of the non-Aryan peoples of Assam, built strong kingdoms under various names like the Chutia, the Kachari and the Koch and held sway over one or another part of the region during different historical times.¹⁰ However, with the

7. P.C. Chaudhury, *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.*, (Delhi, 1987), 107.

8. Rajmohan Nath, *Background of Assamese Culture*, (Gauhati, 1978), particularly pp.25-43.

9. B.K. Baruah, *A Cultural History of Assam*. (Gauhati, 1969), 6.

10. *Ibid.*, 7.

coming of the Ahoms from the east and the Aryans from the west there was considerable pressure on these people.

Various historians have tried to show Assam's early contact with the Aryan India by pointing out the references in the Ramayana and Mahabharata.¹¹ While it is possible to prove that there was some contact it is not possible to maintain that there was any significant migration of Aryans to this region prior to 6th century A.D. There is of course considerable historical evidence to show that in the early centuries of the Christian era a significant number of Aryans came and settled in the region. "The Aryan influence became so widespread, and penetrating that even minor Vedic customs and ritual became deep-rooted in the life of the common people." There is some evidence to show that an Indo-Aryan language distinct from the language spoken in Bengal existed in Assam in the middle of 7th century, which gradually developed into the modern Assamese language.¹² It is only natural that the languages which existed prior to the Aryanisation contributed in the process of development of this new language.¹³ The Ahoms came to Assam at a much later stage (13th Century). They got assimilated to the extent that they not only adopted Assamese as the court language but from the beginning of the seventeenth century also began to write their prose chronicles called *Buranjis* in Assamese.¹⁴ It is of course true that many of the Austric and Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups continued to preserve their own identity. The emergence of this new language seems to have given birth to a linguistic community in the Brahmaputra valley which embraced the various communities

-
11. See, Rajmohan Nath, *op. cit.* and B.K. Baruah, *op. cit.* who make use of the references in the epic to maintain that Assam had close contact with the rest of India in the Ancient times.
 12. B.K. Baruah, *op. cit.*, 9. For detailed discussion see, B. Kakati, *Assamese: Its Formation and Development*, (Gauhati 1962), 6. S. K. Chatterjee for instance maintains that Hieun Tsang's account suggests that there was one language spoken in Bihar and Bengal and only in Assam there was a distinction. See, S. K. Chatterjee, *Origin and Development of Bengali Language*, Vol. 1, (Calcutta, 1926), 140.
 13. B. Kakati (ed.), *Aspects of Early Assamese Literature* (Gauhati, 1953), 9-14.
 14. B.K. Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age*, (Calcutta, 1970), 259-60.

The Guwahati Declaration & the Road to Peace in Assam

harmony. Even during the communalised situation following the demolition of Babri Masjid only in some pockets of the state communal violence erupted and the regional press in Assam accused that Hiteswar Saikia is responsible for it. Assamese weeklies had in fact focused on the positive role played by ULFA in handling the ugly incidents. Karbi leader Jayanta Rongpi has already formed a new group called Sangrami Birodhi Morcha, which is mobilising people, cutting across linguistic communities, to protest against the repressive measures and the Army atrocities. Since activities of such Organisations embrace people of all communities in Assam⁵⁹ and since a section of the Assamese middle class is responding positively, such efforts may create some understanding among the various communities which in turn may create conditions for solving the complex problems associated with the nationalities question in Assam.

59. Report on the activities of this organization in the Assamese Weekly *Budhbar*. (Gauhati, March 6, 1991).

3

Ethnic Unrest*

HEMANTA BARMAN

The emergence of ethnic unrest has been causing turmoil in several countries for the last few decades. Many countries have become battlegrounds for ethnic disputes and conflicts. This has resulted in bloodshed and curtailment of human rights. Countries have disintegrated, making way for formation of new ones or restructuring of those existing, but there has been no end to the problem. The profundity of ethnicity is noteworthy in the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, India, the United States and many other countries. The problem created by ethnicity has given trouble to every kind of state machinery and governance.

Ethnicity can be considered a relatively new concept. The word 'ethnicity' was not included in the 1933 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*; it found place only in its 1972 edition. In its 1973 edition the *American Heritage Dictionary* defined Ethnicity as "The condition of Belonging to a particular ethnic group" and "ethnic pride."

Ethnicity or feelings of intimacy with the tribe one is born in, is a natural tendency. It is a very natural inclination for people to identify themselves with the behavior, religious beliefs and culture of their own race. Ethnic identity usually determined in this way

* This paper originally written in Assamese was translated for the purpose of the seminar by Biman Anandhara. Ed.

basic group identity consists of the readymade sets of endowments and identifications which every individual shares with others from the moment of birth by the chance of the family into which he is born at the given time in that given place.

Moreover, in addition to factors like one's individual name, family name, ethnic culture, national and regional tribal links, language, religion and geography, other factors too become necessary in the determination of ethnicity. These factors may be similar at various stages of evolution of society or they may assimilate. At times though, even after getting assimilated these factors may raise their heads again. This is called emergence of ethnicity. To Soviet social scientist ethnicity was a social phenomenon and "this term can be used to denote not only a tribe or nationality but also a nation, but there is the opinion that its use should be confined to pre-nation formations."

Ethnicity may show itself in a welfare or socialist state or in any kind of governance or political systems. No country, be it the then socialist Soviet Union or the capitalist United States has remained free from the problem of ethnicity. Similarly, rich and poor nations too are saddled with this problem. Issues of ethnicity may arise in any country or region owing to social, political, economic, cultural or historical factors. Generally a race means an ethnic group. In case of a species the biological characteristics are most important. Sometimes a race may evolve on the basis of a language, religion or geographical location. Physical features of people alone may not form the basis for classification of a race. At different points of time different factors may act to give rise to ethnicity.

As a result of spread and growth of education, easy availability of information and fast development of science, a once-ignorant people or tribe can become enlightened and raise voices of protest against protracted deprivation and injustice. If the hopes and aspirations of a tribe gets reflected in such protests, then it can be called emergence of ethnicity. Social and political systems too make people aware of their rights. This may then lead to a spontaneous outburst of their resentment and anger or it may even take an

organized form. If the demand for restoration of social and political justice is raised by smaller communities, it must be understood that the demand for democratic decentralization lies hidden in it. This signifies that a democratic system is alive. According to social scientists ethnicity is not a basic "attribute of man" nor an "aberration on the road to rational society."

In the former Soviet Union the historically advanced Russians enjoyed an un-proclaimed dominance socially. Moreover, owing to the centralized one-party rule of the Communists, many aspects of democracy had remained subdued. It was Gorbachev's open policy that led to an eruption of the aspirations of the oppressed and the country was transformed into its present state. In the same way although there were enough provisions for self-rule under the single-party system in Yugoslavia, it was the Serbs who indirectly dominated affairs. As a consequence an uprising became inevitable and the conflict is yet to come to an end.

In India there is political democracy but no social democracy. Government and administration are in the hands of upper castes. This has resulted in the oppressed classes giving vent to their feelings of deprivation through ethnic demands. Hence, the recommendations of the Mandal Commission made the upper castes unhappy. The imbroglio has not yet been removed despite the democratic system of rule in the country.

Racial discrimination exists even in an advanced democratic country like the United States. Setting up of 'White Colonies' by the whites bears testimony to the fact that the Amerindians and the blacks are still neglected. So ethnic conflict and confusion are still rife there.

India is a multi-racial and multi-lingual country, where a particular community cannot be held responsible for adding fuel to the fire of ethnic assertion. Whether at the national level or at the regional level the issue of ethnicity in our country is very complex. It may not be a single community, but the fact that the rein of power is being held centrally by a particular class, cannot be denied. The net of economic and political interests of this class is well spread out in the whole country. It is then natural for smaller communities

to get offended. The ruling class in India are the upper castes, whose all-devouring lust for power has obstructed the natural hopes and aspirations of different communities.

The demand for self assertion on the basis of language in the post-independence period must not be forgotten. Many linguistic communities were reluctant to accept Hindi as the national language. One is well aware how Andhra Pradesh broke away from Madras on the basis of language. Complicated issues like Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and 'Independent Assam' cropped up along with problems in Punjab, Nagaland and Mizoram. The Indian rulers who represent the country's economic powers, have always sought a vast market for their ilk because such a market makes it possible for them to establish their influence everywhere. To sustain this rule they use slogans like "We are all Indians." Although India is a Union of States, it has only one centralized legal system.

Many tend to say that in a secular country like India, the concept of caste system is static. But according to Professor Irfan Habib: "Caste still remains perhaps the one single-most important divisive factor in our country." Of course it is true that although the prevalence of casteism is not felt openly, it is very much there in a latent form. Although the foreigners movement in Assam did not raise the question of caste and creed, wasn't a casteist mentality working when the issue of reservations for tribals and scheduled castes was raised? It is not long since the Mandal Commission's recommendations caused a turmoil in the entire country.

In ancient times this part of the country what is today referred to as North-East India remained separate from mainland India geographically and politically. But it is clear that it had cultural links with India, because material and technical knowledge of the ancient composite culture that had grown up in the Gangetic basin had spread to the Brahmaputra valley at a very early stage. The process of Aryanisation and Sanskritisation in Kamrup started in the fourth century with Aryanisation of the ruling family. Although the process is still continuing, it is not smooth and is still incomplete. In the middle ages too this region was outside the control of vast centralized rule of the Turko-Afghans and the Moghuls. It was during

this period that an unprecedented move was made to include the tribals in the Aryanisation process, because of the Bhakti movement, but its influence remained confined to some particular areas only. This was an outcome of Srimanta Sankardeva's liberal Vaishnava movement.

Till the advent of the British following the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26), Assam was politically unattached to India. The foreign rulers gradually set up their base in the north eastern region, with the Brahmaputra valley coming under British rule in 1826, Cachar plains in 1832, Naga Hills between 1866-1904, Garo Hills in 1872-73 and Lushai Hills in 1890. Assam was initially under the Bengal presidency and in 1921 after the Government of India Act, 1919, became a Governor's province. The British rulers had kept most of the hill areas separate from Assam. To a small extent the tea sector created an environment for industrialization in this backward region. After coming in contact with the British, an Assamese middle-class did grow, but historically it was very weak.

Assam like India, is a multi-racial and multi-lingual state. For a long time before independence the numerically larger Assamese community had, as expected, lived peacefully with the smaller communities. But in the last two decades demands for recognition have been raised by many constituents of the Assamese society. Many communities have even raised the demand for greater autonomy. The issue of self-assertion of smaller groups was not forceful immediately after independence. But the idea was growing popular, albeit in a subdued manner, among the tribals and the socially disadvantaged. The ethnic problems of the hills and plains differed. While the hills were not easily influenced by the process of Aryanisation and Sanskritisation, the plains tribals did come in contact with it. Still, many tribes stuck to their own customs and traditions. For instance, even today the Karbis living around Guwahati follow the primitive method of burying the dead. Like in other parts of India, the plains tribals of Assam too are at a lower rung of the caste society. Despite many constitutional provisions they are still underprivileged socially. Of course, a middle-class section is now rising among them and voices are being raised against the

7

Building Peace: Locating the Actors and their Roles

MONIRUL HUSSAIN

Building peace in Assam is a difficult task. It is difficult because peace process has not yet started despite long standing conflict and its resultant violence and disturbance. Whatever sporadic efforts were made on earlier occasions, these failed without any tangible gain. Disturbance and conflict have become largely institutionalized since the nineteen eighties without any sign of abnegation. Of course, there were periodic lulls in the situation, only to flare up at a later stage. There were dim hopes of peace at certain stages only to be shattered before it reached its take off stage. Conflict continues to be the ground reality, overtly or covertly. The conflict has dehumanized the society, destabilized the polity and derailed the economy very significantly. In such a situation, the rule of law has been the major casualty.

Before entering into the substantive theme, it would be pertinent to locate the major actors who play a crucial role in conflict as well as in building peace. The major actors in the peace process or in conflict are the following: (i) the state, (ii) the insurgents, (iii) the economy (iv) the people and (v) the civil society. I consider them to be the internal factors. However, one can locate easily, in many cases of conflict or resolution of conflict the role of external actors. We must note, these actors are not mutually exclusive, they

are in fact intimately related to one another. These actors play crucial parts in the process of emergence, control, containment and resolution of conflict. In order to understand the process of emergence of conflict or for that matter of building peace, we must take into serious scrutiny, the role played by these actors in relation to others. In Assam too, these actors have been playing their role in such a way that peace has remained elusive and the masses have suffered a good deal over a long period of time. Here, we are attempting briefly at understanding the role of each of these actors in the process of conflict and peace in the specific context of Assam

The State

The state as the supreme political institution is perhaps the most crucial in building both the condition for conflict as well as the condition for peace. The post- colonial Indian State, which emerged after independence and partition failed to distance itself from the legacy of the colonial state. The bureaucracy, the main pillar of any modern state, failed to become the public servants in India; it largely continued to be the masters of the public even during the post-colonial period very similar to colonial period. It has been successful in manipulating the entire state structure, masses, and most significantly, the political leaders. It remained virtually unaccountable. It expanded unmanageably and it continued to be unproductive, inefficient and to a large extent corrupt. Hence, it failed the political class/ political leaders during the post- colonial period. It collaborated with the political as well as with the economically dominant classes in cornering the benefits of independence at the cost of the masses. The structure of inequality consolidated significantly during the post-colonial period. The unequal economic development of various regions in India has generated frustration among the neglected masses. The politicization of frustration has led to anti-state/anti-center political expression of both democratic and violent means. The response of the state towards such expressions has been either accommodative or suppressive, and at times a mixture of both. It failed to resolve many conflicts, some of which are as old as India's independence.

The Indian State continued to grow bigger, stronger and more powerful during the post-colonial period. However, it remained largely insensitive to the smaller identities and their aspirations. Many a times, it wanted to homogenize the heterogeneous structure of the Indian society. There have been attempts to counter its historical reality i.e. pluralism and multi-culturalism. There are still dangerous attempts at creating a "mainstream" and asking all the people to join the undefined "mainstream". If joining the mainstream means joining the culture of dowry, casteism and communalism, then I am sure many smaller identities would hate to join such a "mainstream" and prefer to live where they are. The over centralized Indian State has left a very limited space for the autonomous growth of smaller communities and the hinterlands in which they live. The situation of conflict in Assam is to be seen in this overall context of the post-colonial Indian State. The big Indian State has failed to understand its own smaller communities and their hinterlands. Such insensitivity has led to alienation and frustration, which found expression in conflict. Such conflict is resolvable if the condition that has given birth to such a situation is removed. The state can obviously play a positive role in this direction. The state needs to become little more generous, sensitive, imaginative and creative in handling such a conflict. Many a times, we have seen the "irresponsible state" in a conflict situation. If the state behaves like the irresponsible insurgents, then peace becomes as elusive as the dreams of independence of the insurgents. The greatness of a big state lies not in the might of its brute force but on the greatness of its heart and morality. In Assam, I feel the state needs to reinvent its morality and rediscover its legitimacy to come closer to its alienated people.

The Insurgents

The insurgents are a major actor in the conflict situation in Assam as elsewhere. They too obviously can play a crucial role in building peace in Assam. At the present juncture, I venture to guess, they will not come forward to peace initiatives as that does not bring any tangible gain or credibility to them. Notwithstanding several military operations including the ongoing one, the insurgents

have neither been substantially weakened nor uprooted from the ground. As long as the structural conditions exist, they will continue to survive the military onslaughts again and again. We all know that in Assam, the rate of rural unemployment is extremely high, agriculture has become unproductive; in such a situation the rural youths are likely to join the cadre of the insurgents in search of an alternative source of living and *weltangchuung*. The dropouts of the system feel empowered when they find a gun to express themselves. They feel great only to be retaliated by the system later. In the process many insurgents have given their lives to "decolonize" their living space. Most insurgents and their supporters in Northeast Assam view their society or motherland as a colony of Delhi/India. They want to "decolonize" their society and their dream of decolonization situates them against the mighty Indian State. "Decolonization" remains as distant dream as it was when the insurgency began in Assam nearly two decades ago. In the conflict between the insurgents and the state. The ordinary masses have suffered immensely in the crossfire. Extortion, unimaginable in Assam till early eighties, has become a common practice. Many people pay taxes to two sets of governments the over-ground and the underground simultaneously within the same political territory. The imaginary/ dream map of one group of insurgents clashes with the map of the other group. This is a major contradiction between two major insurgent outfits in Assam that is, the ULFA and the NDFB. Even if we assume that Assam will be liberated from "Delhi's colonialism", the fight for a disputed territory will begin immediately! The secessionist movements in Assam began without any appreciable consolidation of its ideological foundation. Hence, it had to depend more on arms for its expansion than on ideology. Obviously, in such a situation, the insurgents failed to popularize their movement struggle. They have become somewhat restricted or blocked in the presence of a big state and the absence of ideological consolidation. However, structural condition, which had given birth to the insurgency in Assam remains largely the same. Until and unless, these structural conditions are changed drastically insurgency is rely to continue with all its resultant processes.

The Economy

The precarious nature of the economy of Assam and the entire North-East is well known. It is not at all difficult to conceptualize the location of Assam and the North-East as a periphery of India in economic, political and psychological sense. Philosopher Mrinal Miri had observed:

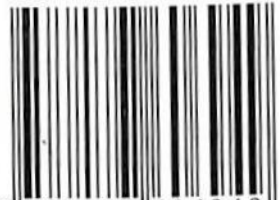
The economy of Northeast . . . and it does not require an economist to say this . . . it is stagnant. It lost its inner motivation ever since it was debarred access, through the drawing of international boundaries . . . to the north, to the east, to the south and to the west. . . . The important point to realize here is, of course, that economic self-sufficiency is also the natural basis for a sense of moral, cultural and civilizational autonomy. And self-sufficiency is not something that can come as a gift . . . it must come through one's own effort and vision.

The economy of Assam and the North-East remained distorted. It lacks both self-sufficiency and autonomy to accommodate basic economic requirement of the people and the region. The underdeveloped economy has generated tremendous mass frustration at the grass-root level. The economy needs to be geared up for autonomous growth. It must open up to all its neighbouring countries for mutually beneficial relationships. Besides it needs to build its human resources more creatively to enhance efficiency and self-confidence of the new generation. A vibrant economy is likely to create condition for both development and peace simultaneously.

People and Civil Society

In the crossfire between the state and the insurgents, the people have suffered immensely. If the suffering of the people, particularly the misery of children and women in a long standing conflict situation is taken into account introspectively by both these two actors; then peace has a chance in Assam. If the interest of the 'people' comes first in their political agenda, then it becomes easier for both the state and the insurgent groups to come closer and to build peace.

ISBN 81-87606-94-0



9 788187 606949

AKANSHA PUBLISHING HOUSE

R-37B, Vani Vihar, Uttam Nagar, New Delhi-110 059

Showroom:

4649/21-B, Ansari Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110 002 (INDIA)

Email: ektabooks@yahoo.com