

Probable Options

Cementing the Faultlines in Assam

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Broadly, there are three areas that give rise to conflict situations in Assam, *viz.*, the ethnic composition of the social base, the underdeveloped economic base and the territorial location of the State. Here, we shall concentrate on the first area. In fact, the incongruity between the ethnic Assamese aspirations to make Assam a 'nation-province' and the polyethnic population composition has long been a persistent source of inter-ethnic conflicts.

While the discourse on 'making Assam a nation-province' is largely informed of the post-independent Indian experience of forming linguistic States, it has all along underrated, or deliberately ignored, the historical specificity of societal development in colonial Assam. In fact, the population composition of 'feudal Assam' had changed completely due to territorial reorganisation and large-scale state sponsored migration during the colonial regime itself. Assam's relative population homogeneity had been bartered against the British economic interests. There are several studies¹ on this state-sponsored

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¹ See Monirul Hussain, *The Assam Movement*, New Delhi: Manak Publications, 1993; Gurudas Das, "Migration, Ethnicity and Competition for

immigration in 'colonial Assam', and here we do not intend to elaborate upon this aspect any further. What is important to note is the resultant polyethnic character of 'post-colonial Assam'.

The political history of post-colonial Assam may conveniently be divided into two distinct phases: the pre-reorganised phase (1947-72) and post-reorganised phase (1973 onwards). In the post-independent pre-reorganised Assam, the demographic heterogeneity had widened further following the adoption of the model of integration of the tribal communities of Mizo, Naga, Khasi, Garo and Jaintia Hills through Assam. This had further weakened the claim of the ethnic Assamese elites to make Assam a 'nation-province'. This model of integration through Assam (henceforth ITA) not only added further force to the strong linguistic and religious cleavages that developed during the colonial regime, it also added new dimensions in the form of racial and religious cleavages as the tribal communities are of Mongoloid origin and predominantly Christian.

The Nehruvian ITA model was built on a Pan-Indian ideology and sought to integrate the tribal entities with the Indian 'mainstream'. Since, at that time, 'mainstream' India considered Assam to be the last outpost of Indian civilization in the east, she was entrusted with the responsibility to complete the unfinished task of integrating the tribal entities in the Northeast. As has already been pointed out, the addition of tribal territories to Assam made her an ethnic cauldron, with no single community having a convincing majority. The inter-ethnic competition for power and state privileges in such a segmented society not only gave birth to a complicated cleavage structure, but also formed the social base for a perpetual source of conflicts.

As part of a conflict resolution mechanism, the Assamese elite adopted the policy of 'assimilation', in contradistinction with the avowed Nehruvian policy of integration, which was then

State Resources: An Explanation of the Social Tension in North East India,' in M K Raha and Alok Kumar Ghosh, eds., *North east India: The Human Interface*, New Delhi: Cyan, 1998; Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999; M Kar, *Muslims in Assam Politics*, New Delhi: Omsons, 1990; Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978; Arun Chandra Bhuyan and Sibopada De, eds., *Political History of Assam, vol-H, 1920-1939*, Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 2nd edition.

thought to be the best policy option for achieving simultaneously the goal of 'nation-province' and cementing the segmented polity in Assam. In their bid to make Assam a homeland of the Assamese like the other linguistic States in India, the Assamese ethnic boundary (linguistic group) was made flexible in order to accommodate the immigrant Bengali Muslims as well as the tea tribes. This provided a numerical majority to the Assamese in polyethnic Assam. It may be pointed out that, at this stage, the Congress-led ruling elites in Assam tacitly encouraged the immigration of Muslim Bengalis from East Pakistan. As the immigrant Muslim Bengalis readily shifted their ethnic identity in favour of Assamese, they became useful not only as a 'safe vote bank' but also strengthened the majority claim of the Assamese. Thus, at one stage, the immigration of Muslim Bengalis from across the border was seen as part of a larger political strategy which had enabled the ethnic Assamese political elites to stake majority claim in order to justify the realization of the goal of nation-province.

It may also be noted that this game plan of the ethnic Assamese elites also suited the needs of the immigrant Bengali Muslims. They came to Assam in search of a *lebensraum*. Faced with strong push factors at home arising out of a 'failed state syndrome' in East Pakistan, economic security for them was much more important than their cultural symbols. In fact, their decision to barter their cultural identity against economic security was also essentially political. While indicating this, it is not intended to deny the fact that this has also created a space, albeit limited, for naturalised assimilation of the new generations of immigrant Muslims. But primarily, the relationship between the two communities may, at best, be described as a marriage of convenience. The immigrants needed a living space and the ethnic Assamese elites needed their political support to stake a majority claim in polyethnic Assam.

But this strategy of assimilation that had been attempted through the practice of majoritarian politics did not work. The segmented social space in post-independent reorganised Assam, instead, presented an altogether different political reality. Majoritarian politics practised in a polyethnic society leads to

unequal development of various socio-economic formations, particularly of the minorities and peripheral groups.

It may not be out of context to note that, while the process of unequal development within a homogeneous society leads to class-cleavages, the same process, within a polyethnic society, leads to ethnic cleavages. While class cleavages do not pose any territorial threat in terms of separation or secession, the ethnic cleavages do pose a threat, particularly when different ethnic groups are territorially concentrated. And the geo-political location of a territory, undoubtedly, plays a crucial role in setting the political goal of a deprived segment. While the separatist goals are feasible, irrespective of territorial location, secessionist goals are more feasible for the communities living along international borders.²

Be that as it may, the relentless efforts made towards homogenisation and realisation of the goal of making Assam a nation-province during the 1950s and 1960s had resulted in unmanageable discontent among various groups, which ultimately led to the reorganisation of Assam in 1972 along ethnic lines. Although the diversity of ethnic cleavages has reduced in post-reorganised Assam, the faultlines continue to persist. Though the 1972 reorganisation has reduced the demographic heterogeneity and rendered the ethnic Assamese as the single largest community in Assam, their aspirations to make Assam a nation-province remained unfulfilled. Instead, a new dimension came into sharp focus in post-reorganised Assam, i.e. the steady ingress of immigrant Muslims into the political power structures. It is, indeed, an irony of the politics of ethnicity in Assam that the immigrant Muslims, who had been instrumental in making Assamese the single largest community at one point of time and helped them to advance the claim of making Assam a nation-province, are now viewed as the principal threat to the political security of the ethnic Assamese in the State. In approximately 23 electoral constituencies out of a total of 120 Legislative Assembly segments, Muslims are now believed to enjoy majority support.³ In another seven constituencies, they are the deciding factor. In

² Gurudas Das, "Understanding India's North East: Security, Integration and Development", (*mimeo*), OKDISCD, Guwahati, 2001.

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order to counter the growing electoral strength of the immigrant Muslims whose strategic support is no longer important in post-reorganised Assam, the ethnic Assamese elites wanted to get rid of them and, thus, demanded their deportation by setting 1951 as the cut-off year. The anti-foreigner agitation or the Assam Movement (1979-85) has, thus, lent support to our hypothesis that Assam's policy of assimilation of the immigrant Muslims had been a tactical move intended to gain mileage over other ethnic groups in polyethnic Assam during the 1950s and 1960s. They were used as pawns in the numbers game to realise the aspirations of the ethnic Assamese. And with the failure of the strategy of assimilation in realising the goal of making Assam a nation-province, the attitude of ethnic Assamese towards immigrant Muslims has changed. From a constituent of the Assamese linguistic community, they were suddenly branded as foreigners in Assam.

In spite of sensitising some of the security concerns arising out of fresh illegal immigration of Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh, the Assam Movement has failed in realising its goal as far as the deportation of immigrant Muslims is concerned. Like the agenda of making Assam a nation-province, the 'deportation-goal' was also unattainable, given the constitutional and legal framework of the country. On the contrary, the ethnic ideology of the movement has made it amply clear that the inclusion of a group within the Assamese ethnic boundary, or for that matter its exclusion (from it), is defined exclusively by the interest of the 'ethnic Assamese'. Linguistic symbols alone are not sufficient to claim Assamese identity. Rather, non-existence of an 'other' cultural / sub-cultural base has become the prime criterion. The Movement, thus, in a way, drew an implicit boundary in a hitherto open-ended process of Assamese nationality formation. The exclusionist ethnic ideology of the Movement alarmed ethnic minorities and encouraged them in a compelling way to construct their identities in rigid terms in order to claim politico-territorial autonomy in their respective traditional homelands. Besides, the Bengalis of Barak valley, who have all along opposed the Assamese idea of making Assam a nation-province, the Bodos, Karbis and Dimasas have also started pressing hard for complete autonomy. The Tiwas, Deuris, Lalungs and Koch Rajbanshis have

also made conscious efforts to dissociate themselves from the Assamese identity. Thus, instead of mellowing down in post-reorganised Assam, the residual faultlines have widened further.

Before we consider the available options for cementing these ethnic faultlines in Assam, another centrifugal dimension that keeps the State and ethnic Assamese civil society apart is in order. One of the basic causes of conflict between the State and ethnic Assamese civil society is the non-coincidence of the State political boundary and the Assamese ethnic boundary. While ethnic Assamese civil society claims nation-province status for Assam, it does not take into consideration the identity claims of other communities whose homelands have made up the political boundary of Assam. As the managers of State have to address far larger constituencies other than the ethnic Assamese constituency, the forces of *realpolitik* deter them from directly addressing the issues raised by the ethnic Assamese civil society. As a result, the predicament of the ruling elites is far more than that of the ethnic Assamese civil society activists. As the credibility of ruling elites lies in protecting the territorial integrity of Assam, unlike the civil society protagonists, they have to adopt a more accommodative conflict resolution mechanism. These predicaments in governance are often interpreted by the civil society as weaknesses of the state, which they vow to rectify by making Assam a 'nation-province'.

Thus, one of the root causes that give rise to conflict situations in Assam lies in the incongruity between the polyethnic social base and ethnic Assamese aspirations to make Assam a nation-province. Since independence, the ethnic Assamese civil society has taken relentless strides to transform Assam into a nation-province, which in turn generated inter-ethnic conflicts of unmanageable proportions. Assam is, thus, faced with a dilemma: whether to maintain the state political boundary, which accommodates a multitude of ethnic identities, or to achieve the much cherished ethnic Assamese goal of nation-province. Given the polyethnic social base, both the goals cannot be attained simultaneously (at least in the short run). Hence, the options for cementing faultlines in Assam are goal-specific.

Option 1: If the goal is to maintain the territorial integrity of the present political boundary of Assam, then the practice of

consociational democracy can better serve this purpose rather than majoritarian politics. In fact, the politico-administrative structure evolved in Assam on the basis of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution had created a political space more suitable for the practice of consociational politics, which calls for inter-segmental elite co-operation in managing affairs in a plural society. The segmental elites in a consociational framework adopt more tolerant attitude towards others, commit themselves to the territorial integrity of the political unit and functioning of the democratic processes, and simultaneously also protect the interests of their respective segments. Consociational democracy works through the grand coalition of the political elites of all significant segments of the plural society.⁴ Besides grand coalition, the other basic elements of consociational democracy are:

- i. the mutual veto which serves as an additional protection of vital minority interests;
- ii. proportionality as the principal standard of political representation, civil service appointments and allocation of public funds; and
- iii. a high degree of autonomy for each segment to run its own internal affairs.⁵

Political elites in Assam need to develop a working formula for inter-segmental co-operation in line with the above-mentioned principles of consociational democracy. In such an arrangement, the inter-segmental relationships get structured and all significant segments are engaged in governance. No single segment can assume a hegemonistic position as no one can advance its interest without the co-operation of others. The inter-dependence of inter-segmental interests, as a result, leads to co-operation rather than rivalries. As every segment enjoys maximum internal autonomy and shares state privileges proportionally, there is hardly any incentive in demanding either separation or secession.

Option - 2: If the goal is to make Assam a nation-province, then the territorial integrity of Assam has to be compromised once again, similar to the 1972 reorganisation. It may be pointed out

⁴ Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1989.

⁵ Ibid.

that the replacement of segmental loyalties by a common national or nationality allegiance appears to be a logical answer to the problems posed by a plural society. But, it is extremely dangerous to attempt it. Because of the tenacity of primordial loyalties, any effort to eradicate them is not only quite unlikely to succeed, especially in the short run, but may well be counterproductive and may stimulate segmental cohesion and inter-segmental violence rather than national or nationality cohesion.⁶ This is exactly what has happened in Assam. The attempt towards forced assimilation of the majority ethnic groups has already proved to be counter-productive. As a result, if Assam is to make a nation-province, the homeland of the ethnic Assamese, it is achievable only at the cost of her territorial integrity. This option would not only lead to further reorganisation of Assam, it would even prove to be disastrous for the ethnic Assamese nationality as well. As the process of Assamese nationality formation has remained incomplete, various sub-cultural groups that constitute the Assamese nationality are likely to reconstruct their respective identities leading to its ultimate disintegration.

It is, thus, important to initiate a composite dialogue involving the political elites and civil society activists of all significant segments in order to arrive at a consensus as to whether they desire to coexist under a common political unit or want to split the political space in favour of fuller autonomy for the respective segments. If they decide to coexist, a co-operative framework must be evolved which will ensure justice to all segments. If they decide to split, they must be sure that they are not stepping into a reductionist trap.

⁶ Eric A. Nordlinger, *Conflict Regulation in Divided Societies*, Occasional Papers in International Affairs, no. 29, Harvard University, as cited in Lijphart.