

Identity, Insurgency and Underdevelopment: A Study of Post-Colonial Assam

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Abstract

Assam, the most populous state of Northeast India has been experiencing the problems of identity and insurgency since independence. The problem with identity has arisen due to the clash between the aspirations of the ethnic Assamese to make Assam a “nation province” for the Assamese and the historically developed multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society of Assam. But the idea of a nation-province for the ethnic Assamese is an unrealizable dream within the present political boundary of Assam because the society in Assam has historically been multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-caste, multi-class and multi-lingual in composition. The political boundary of Assam not only includes the ethnic Assamese but also the indigenous groups like Bodos, Rabhas, Dimasas, Karbis Koch- Rajbangshis, Miris, Lalungs, Morans along with the Bengali Hindus, Muslims, Nepalis and the Tea Tribes. However, the continuous effort of the ethnic Assamese to make Assam a province for them has fueled the identity assertion of other ethnic groups. The failure of the Indian state to address the identity issues of the ethnic communities has led to the problem of insurgency and underdevelopment in the state. In this paper an attempt has been made to explain the linkages among identity, insurgency and economic underdevelopment in the post colonial Assam.

Key words: Identity, Insurgency, Ethnic Assertion, Identity Movement, Underdevelopment.

Introduction:

Assam is the most populous state among the eight sisters of northeastern region of India. The state accounts for about 2.4 per cent of total geographical area in the country and 2.6 per cent of India's population. The density of population at 340 per square kilometer is slightly higher than the all-

India density of 324 as per 2001 census data..According to the Census of India, 2011 the population of Assam stands at 3,11,69,272, of which 1,59,54,927 are males and 1,52,14,345 females. Assam is a house of natural and precious mineral resources. During colonial period Assam covered almost entire north east India but it has lost much of its territory to new states emerging from within its borders since early 1960s. The Naga Hills district became the 16th state of the Indian Union in 1963. The Khasi, Jaintia and the Garo Hills became the separate state of Meghalaya in 1972. The North East Frontier Agency (Arunachal Pradesh) and the Mizo Hills (Mizoram) were also separated from Assam and both became states in 1986. However still Assam is the largest and the most populous state among ‘the eight sisters’ in the Northeast of India. It covers an area of 78,438 square kilometer. According to 2011 the population of Assam stands at 3,11,69,272, of which 1,59,54,927 are males and 1,52,14,345 females. Assam accounts for about 2.4 per cent of total geographical area in the country but it accommodate 2.6 per cent of India’s population. The density of population in Assam is 398 in comparison to the all-India density of 382 persons per square kilometer. The state is a house of precious mineral resources.

Condition of Economy: Colonial Period

The chapter of industrial history of Assam began during the pre- independence period, and Assam found its place in the industrially developed map of the world. It was counted among the economically prosperous states of the country in the early 1950s. During the colonial period crude oil was discovered in Assam and Asia’s first and worlds third oil refinery was established at Digboi of Assam. Coalfield was also first explored in the colonial period. The cultivation of tea started during the colonial period and its global export brought economic boom to Assam. The per-capitia income of Assam was also higher than the all-India level in the early 1950s. During the 19th century, Assam had witnessed considerable progress in the industrial sector and it was only since the middle of the 20th century that Assam started lagging behind. To quote the former Prime Minister Deve Gowda, "Assam was in the forefront of the economic development of the country 100-150 years ago. It was a pioneering State and enterprising entrepreneurs invested in the development of tea-plantations, oil, coal mining, forestry, railways and inland waterways". (Das: 2001)

Condition of Economy: Post Colonial Period

The continuous process of economic and industrial development of the state became almost stagnant after the attainment of independence and the present Assam is one of the industrially under-developed states of the country. The human development in the state is also very poor. The average per capita income of Assam and all-India stood at Rs 1702 and Rs 3211 respectively. In terms of life expectancy at birth, the state is "the worst performer with both males (61 years) and females (63.2 years) between 2006 and 2010." Where national life expectancy at birth for males was 71.5 years and 76.9 years for females. The infant mortality rate of the state is also among the highest in the country at 55 people, which is higher than the national average of 44 people. On the other hand, the birth rate in the state in 2011 was 22.8 per 1000 against the national average of 21.8 per 1000, while the death rate was 8 per 1000 against the national average of 7.1 per 1000. The state has the lowest gross enrollment ratio in schools (between 6-13 years) in 2010-11. The rate of urbanization in Assam is low with urban areas accounting for only 14.8 per cent of the total population in 2011 compared to the all-India rate of 31.15 per cent.

Identity Movements and Insurgency

The reasons behind such underdeveloped condition in the post colonial period cannot be understood without understanding the ethnic composition and socio economic changes which occurred due to independence and partition of the country, complex problem of migration in the state from the neighboring country of Bangladesh and the capitalistic path of development adopted by the post colonial Indian State.

Firstly, as a result of partition of the subcontinent on the basis of religion and the transfer of major portion of the then Sylhet District to the erstwhile East Pakistan the Asamiyas became the largest linguistic group in the state and started to dominate the society and politics in Assam.

Secondly, due to the migration of foreigners into Assam from neighboring countries generated a fear psychosis among the "Asamiyas" that they would soon be the minority and numerically insignificant group in their own historic homeland.

Thirdly, as the capitalist path of development and modernization consolidated in India after independence, the peripheral societies like Assam have to face acute regional disparities. Assam, in fact, becomes the deprived state and has remained the economically depressed state within the

federal democratic polity of India. The legacy of the colonial economy seems to be operated freely in Assam despite it becomes an integral part of the independent Indian Union.

In such a situation the Assamese leaders became more vocal about their language, culture and identity and demanded the introduction Assamese as the sole official language of the state ignoring the fact that “society in Assam has historically been multi-racial, multi- religious, multi-ethnic, multi-caste, multi-class and multi-lingual in composition”(Hussain: 2000) The Language Movement of 1960, the Medium of Instruction Movement of 1972 and the Assam Movement 1979-1985 shows the strong identity assertion of the Asamiyas neglecting the plural character of the society in Assam. These movements created large scale terror and generated fear psychosis among the other communities of the state. The Assam Movement which formally came to an end with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 became a reference point for the Bodo Movement. The Bodo leaders considered the Assam Accord as an effort to protect the interest of the Assamese. They felt neglected and the ABSU declared—“The problems of the Bodos and other plain tribes are nothing but a nationality issue .The Bodos have genuine aspiration to establish a distinct Bodo nationality and to get recognized in the world as being civilized and advanced. Without a separate state this is not possible” (Sharma, 2006:146). The ABSU claimed that “Bodos have become the oppressed of the land due to the domination of the Assamese who came in as immigrants during the Ahom rule. The outsider Assamese unjustifiably overthrew the original masters the Kachari” (Sharma, 2006:146) Thus the Bodos alienated from the Assamese society and the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the Bodo Peoples Action Committee (BPAC) gave the call for “divide Assam fifty-fifty” and started agitation. Moreover, after the Assam movement considering the Indian state as colonial power the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) an extremist organization came into existence for the secession of the Assamese from the Indian Union. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) became a reference point for the Bodo extremists groups who believed that government in Delhi and Dispur would not pay any heed to the non violent movement. Accordingly the Bodo militant groups such as National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Bodo liberation Tiger (BLT) started insurgent activities in the Bodo dominated areas of the state. In order create majority of their community started ethnic cleansing process which led to the displacement of lacs of people in the Bodoland Territorial Council. As a result the minority communities of the Bodoland Territorial Council to save them from the Bodo militant formed their own militant groups

such as Bengali Tiger Force (BTF), Adivasi Cobra Militant, and so on. Thus the seed of insurgency spread among different ethnic groups of the state.

Impact on Economy

The persistent insurgent activities of different insurgent groups are the most important cause for economic underdevelopment of the post colonial Assam. As security is the primary infrastructure of economic activities and social stability and certainty about future are the pre-requisite of investment, the insurgents have challenged the internal security of the state by attacking on the life and property of the people. The insurgency activities ULFA, NDFB and BLT have created a serious internal security problem in the state. Their serious attacks on the Railways, highways, markets have thrown the entire economic system out of gear. The insurgent attacks on the resource-based industries like petroleum and tea which form the core of the modern organized sector had conveyed negative signal to the prospective investors. The insurgents have created serious problems for development of the interior areas also. As the state is predominantly rural and characterized in many parts by hilly and sparsely populated and inaccessible human habitations, it is difficult to build up rural infrastructure like roads and communication schools, hospitals and agricultural extension centers. etc in those areas. The insurgency has aggravated the problem to such an extent that development workers of both the Government and NGOs do not dare to going to the hilly and rural areas as they face constant extortions and threats of abduction or death. Moreover, extortionist demands from the insurgent groups have encouraged and legitimized corruption in public domain. The wrong doers are in turn protected by the gunrunners. Businesses buy peace by coughing up a part of their profit which is again compensated by raising the prices of goods and services had led to the decline of consumer welfare. Insurgent-politician-contractor-supplier-nexus siphons the bulk share of development funds leading to the poor quality of development projects. Kidnapping by the militant has made it difficult to get expertise personnel for project implementation. Failures of the state to provide effective and adequate security for the development project agencies have resulted in extraordinary delay and hence escalation of project costs .As the profitable enterprises are being targeted for extortion, insurgency, thus, has caused migration of even local talents and entrepreneurs. All these have made the enterprises non-competitive and perpetuation of underdevelopment in the state.

Moreover, substantial amount of funds have been transferred to the insurgents. The channels through which these funds flow are well known.(Das:2001) Politicians, bureaucrats, bank executives, tea-planters, contractors and others who handle money in government establishments and commercial and industrial houses have bought their own and their colleagues' security by transferring to the insurgents a portion of their ill-gotten monies. In the past, many central leaders had warned the state government against such payments to insurgent organizations. On June 14, 2001, the Union Rural Development Minister, Venkiah Naidu, consequent to a meeting of the Rural Development Ministers of the Northeastern States at Shillong, warned that "the Centre would stop disbursing rural development funds to those States, where a bulk of the funds go to the coffers of the extremist outfits." .(Das:2001) Prior to the imposition of President's rule and in the midst of *Operation Bajrang*, the Governor's report dated November 26, 1990, estimated the amount of extortion till that date by ULFA at approximately Rs. 4 to Rs. 5 billion. In fact, the individual level payments are also reckoned to be on the higher side. One tea company, for example, was found to have paid Rs. 13.5 million to the erstwhile Bodo Security Force, and the security forces reportedly recovered a part of the money. (Das: 2001) The insurgent outfits demand and extract smaller amounts from small businessmen and corrupt government personnel. Moreover, increasing security-related expenditure has crucially constricted available levels of development finance of the state government. A recent report of a committee on Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) in the Northeastern States also mentioned "an upsurge in insurgency in Assam" as responsible for "practically no developmental activities in rural areas" and a simultaneous "flight of capital from the rural areas to urban areas as the former were less secured than the latter." .(Das:2001)

Conclusion:

Thus we find that identity assertion by the dominant group is responsible for the identity conflicts and identity movements in multi-ethnic Assam. The identity conflicts and movements have adversely affected the economic development of the state. With independence the expectation of the people increased. But the capitalist path of development of the post colonial Indian state has failed to meet the raising expectation of the people. The lack of economic development has led to the creation of limited economic opportunities, which in turn has sharpened inter-ethnic competition for access to resources and avenues for livelihood. The failure of the Indian state to meet the expectation of the people and to address the identity issues have led to the problem of insurgency in the state. The adoption of violence as a strategy by the insurgents has made deep impact on the

economy of the state. The insurgency has not only jeopardized the prospect of private investment; but also justified the practice of corruption in the society. Moreover, the limited economic development which appeared in post colonial Assam have been largely biased and in favour of the dominant group, i.e., ethnic Assamese. The members of the dominant group have grabbed the most of the government jobs. The ethnocentric view towards development has created inequality in the society. This inequality, in turn, has given birth to ethnic assertion by the smaller and weaker groups. The Asamiyas cannot dream to have one language homogeneous society in the present Assam because it is inhabited not only by the ethnic Asamiyas but also by the Bodos, Rabhas, Dimasas, Karbis Koch- Rajbangshis, Miris, Lalungs, Morans, and other indigenous groups along with the Bengali Hindus, Muslims, and the Tea Tribes. If Assam is to maintain its integrity and economic development, it is important for the state government to work for the welfare of the all the ethnic groups of the state. Besides the Indian State should address the ethnic issues with utmost care in time and formulate its economic policies in such a way so that the people of the state do not feel deprivation and neglected by the centre. The secularization of political space by way of accommodating the diverse ethnic groups and a change in the outlook of the centre towards the state are two major keys for integrity and economic development in Assam.

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