

Assam Forum Conference 2016
Jubilee Room, YMCA Indian Student Hostel
London W1T 6AQ
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Address by Chairman Dr. Jitendralal Borkakoti

Ladies and gentlemen!

This is the 5th Assam Forum Conference which should have been held in 2016. As you know our 5th Conference was to be a mega 2-day conference and was planned to be held at Kaziranga University. But because of email threats from one militant, we had to cancel the conference, and thereby avoiding any potential risks to the speakers and participants. We managed to get 12 top intellectuals to present papers on four themes. I want to put this on record for posterity. On the theme of reduction of rural poverty, dealing with (a) how agricultural productivity and modern methods, and how commercialisation of horticulture, floriculture and pisciculture can effectively contribute to up lift rural economic welfare, (b) how small-scale tea plantation makes a significant difference as the benefits flow to the rural areas, and (c) why the Human Development indices of Assam are still very poor, the speakers were Professor Kamal Malla Bujarbaruah (VC, Assam Agricultural University), Professor Madhurjya Bezbaruah (Gauhati University), Professor Sanjay Kumar Das (Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Research Complex at Barapani, Meghalaya) Professor Soundarjya Borbora (IIT Guwahati), Dr. Joydeep Baruah (Omeo Kumar Das Institute, Guwahati), Mr. Bidyananda Barkakoty, Vice-Chairman, Tea Board of India). On the second theme of flood control, erosion prevention and safety of the proposed dams, the speakers were three top experts from IIT Guwahati, namely, Professor Arup Sarma, Professor Chandan Mahanta and Dr. Rajib Bhattacharjya. On the third theme of water resources management, we had Dr. Dignata Das (Loughborough University, England), and the fourth theme of Assamese sub-nationalism and ethnic disharmony, we had Professor Nani Gopal Mahanta (Gauhati University). We managed to get ten intellectuals from Assam and one from England. The Assamese culprit or culprits must have enjoyed

psychopathically exciting schadenfreude by successfully scuppering such a potentially brilliant conference. People of this ilk are compulsively motivated not by patriotism but by built-up bile of jealousy and anti-intellectualism. But I did receive emails from many people – all intellectuals, including the VC of AAU – who requested me not to cancel the KU conference, but to hold it at a later date. Sometime in the future, we may have to reconsider this issue.

After the 2015 conference, executive summary of the conference discussions were submitted to the Government of Assam. Our conference also had television exposure in Assam. Let me now comment on what has been happening in Assam in light of what we discussed in the last conference. We had three themes: first to discuss how the identity of an Assamese can be defined; second, gender issues in Assam; third, poor governance and corruption in Assam.

On the identity issue, confusion and debate have been going on with slow realisation that it is not possible to have a culture-based identity. This is a temptation because of Clause 6 of the Assam Accord which is about protecting Assamese culture and identity. This Clause came to exist out of serious anxiety that the large-scale illegal migration of the Bangladeshis may overwhelm our Assamese culture and identity. With protests in Assam over Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2016, Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh said in Decemebr 2016 that culture, tradition and language of Assam will be protected. Let me quote Rajnath Singh: “Full protection will be given and whatever is required to be done administratively, legislatively and constitutionally, will be done”. That is a bold statement from the Home Minister of India. But frankly, nobody can protect our culture. And actually, which culture are we speaking about? Assam is full varied cultures. The Bodo culture, for example, is different from the mainstream Assamese culture; and feelings of the Bodos are hardening against the latter. In the ned, we have to strengthen our own cultural spine so that Bangladeshis or any other interlopers cannot threaten our cultures. This is the only way to protect our culture: nurture and modernise around the core values.

Historically the definitions of an Assamese, as pointed out by Smitana Saikia in the last conference, used one or more of the following parameters: (a)

residents of Assam and their descendants, (b) linguistic group who speak Assamese, (c) ethnic Assamese, who in addition to speaking Assamese, are descendants and have some shared cultural norms, and/or (d) the Bhumiputras, the original inhabitants. The legal definition of a social group involves creating identities in terms of fixed immutable characteristics, but a group's characteristics are formed through cultural osmosis, and hence there is fluidity in the historical formation of identities.

A legal identity of citizenship either through principle of *jus soli* (right of the soil, that is, the right of anyone born in a country to nationality of that country) or through the principle of *jus sanguinis* (right of blood, that is, a person's citizenship is determined by being a descendant of one or both parents who are citizens of that country). However, a social/cultural identity cannot have an absolute definition. Our conclusion, therefore, was that "who an Assamese is" cannot be defined. The serious implication is that we should endeavour to develop a civic identity of who an Assamese is by giving full recognition to our multiple identities. The civic identity simply declares that anyone born in Assam can claim to be an Assamese, while maintaining many other identities. This exactly is the accepted rule in the United Kingdom. Culture-based definition of an Assamese is an impossibility. It has to be based on proximity principle that states first, that there exists a tendency for individuals to form interpersonal relations with those who are close by, and second, the more the people come into contact with each other, the more likely it is to cultivate relationships through social interaction. The definition of the Assam, Cabinet in 1989 which comes close to this is the following: "The term Assamese people shall include all indigenous tribal, non-tribal and local linguistic population living permanently within the geographical boundaries of Assam and the people, who the people, who are at present residing within these boundaries or all genuine citizens who accepted the local languages(s) and culture(s) of Assam as their own". This is a functional and operable definition. That is, the Assamese identity is detached from its exclusive/singular ethnic marker of a particular language, and it clearly embraces

a more composite identity that encompasses languages and dialects spoken in Assam. This line of logical argument has not yet been accepted in Assam as the reverberations of the Assam Movement are still crackling.

At the 4th Conference, Rituparna Sarma and Rimli Das also discussed the gender problems in Assam; and a few very constructive suggestions were made. In June 2016, it was reported the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR), for the 10th successive year, recorded the highest MMR in India which is 300 per 100,000 as compared to the national average of 167 per 100,000. This shameful situation is probably is related to the finding of a survey that almost 33% if the females aged between 20 and 24 were married before the age of 18 years. Also, 46% of the Assamese women aged between 15 and 49 are anaemic. These matters are very likely to be related to the blatant and devious corruption unearthed at the Welfare Department of the Government of Assam.

Human trafficking is going on unabated in the North East with a 250% increase between 2014 and 2015. Out of 1,539 human trafficking cases, only 20 from Meghalaya, 16 from Tripura, 6 from Nagaland and 3 from Arunachal Pradesh, but 1,494 were from Assam. Of the 612 cases of trafficking girls and women registered with Assam Police from 2008 to 2015, investigators could file charge-sheet for only 53 cases. Conviction rates are not known. However, during the same period of time, Police rescued 595 girls and women from the traffickers. Police did arrest 538 traffickers during this period, but entire exercise became futile as charge-sheets could not be filed within 90 days. It is encouraging to note that the Central government also adopted multi-pronged approach to combat this menace, although the State governments are responsible to tackle such crimes.

We also discussed in fair details, the problems of poor governance and transparency which is a euphemism for corruption. It was a Panel discussion led by Apurba Baruah, Dinesh Kakoti, Zaved Choudhury and myself. I am very happy to report that our BJP Chief Minister, Sarbananda Sonowal, has started cracking down on corruption.

Following the directive from the Chief Minister in September 2016, the Social Welfare Department started stream lining its functioning only to find some huge

irregularities. It discovered fake entries of 900,000 ghost children enabling the culprits to siphon off Rs.150 crore per year for 15 years amounting to a scam of Rs.2,250 crore. They discovered 390 fake Anganwadi Centres that helped the criminals to siphon the looted money. Anganwadi Centres provide basic healthcare in Indian villages and are a part of the Indian public healthcare system. Basic healthcare activities include contraceptive counselling, nutrition education and supplementation, and also pre-school activities for children. There are limits to corruption; but this brazen loot is the lowest form of moral degradation of the greedy officers in the Welfare Department of Assam who blatantly looted resources meant for the poor children and women in the rural areas. To use Jawaharlal Nehru's words: these corrupt people should be hanged from the nearest lampposts! I appeal to the Chief Minister that the culprits get their just punishments.

At the last Conference, I reported the rumours in the media about corruption in the office of the Public Service Commission. Krishak Nulti Sangram Samiti and All Assam Studnets' Union have been alleging irregularities, but Tarun Gogoi did not take any action. On 27th October 2016, Mr. Nabakanta Patir, an Engineer at Dibrugarh Town Planning Department was caught red-handed in a sting operation when Mr. Patir, as an Agent of the APSC Chairman, accepted a bribe of Rs.10 Lakh from one Anshumita Gogoi, a dental surgeon from Amguri. The offer from Mr. Patir was a permanent job at the Health and Family Welfare Department through the APSC for Rs.15 lakh. With enough evidence, the Dibrugarh Police arrested Mr. Rakesh Kumar Paul, the Chairman of APSC on 4th November 2016 at his office. Reportedly, Mr. Paul seems to be spilling the beans, telling how he paid three Ministers of the Gogoi Government, also how he made payments to the terrorist groups. I hope Mr. Paul will be convicted and will be sent to prison for a long period of time.

It should be noted that job scams have been going on for a long time. The APSC Chairman during the Saikia Government was also caught red-handed, but nothing came out of it; and to the best of my knowledge, nobody went to prison. Furthermore, the corrupt candidates who bribed to get government jobs kept their

jobs. This is our Assam; that's how things get fizzled out mainly because of a lack of strong leadership from "clean" leaders. My consolation is that the BJP Government, led by an untainted leader, has taken eradication of corruption as a top priority. But there are also causes for concern. As reported in the Press on 12th January 2017, the Criminal Investigation Department has filed a part charge-sheet in connection with a multi-crore scam in the Agricultural Department. It is a part Charge-sheet because the Government has denied prosecution sanction against eight other officials of the Department, including the Director and Chief Engineer. Why? Let the Court decide whether they are guilty or innocent. Is there some protection going on by some powerful people? Chief Minister Sonowal alone will find it difficult to wipe out corruption unless he gets support from a dedicated group of influential politicians.

Poor governance and corruption seem to travel hand in hand. In a CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General) Report on State Finance, Year ending 31st March 2015, it is revealed that a large number of government authorities in Assam have not submitted annual accounts due up to 2014-15. The Report states: "There were instances of loss and misappropriation which remained unsettled with various departments for periods ranging from one to more than 25 years". Shamefully for Assam, 19,648 utilisation certificates for sanctioned grants aggregating Rs.14,332 crore paid to 53 Departments during the period 2001-02 to 2014-15 were in arrears. The Education Department holds the record with 12,454 pending utilisation certificates (87% of the total), amounting to Rs.2,806 crore, followed by the Finance (taxation) Department with 738 pending utilisation certificates, amounting to Rs.1009 crore. One would reasonably suspect that sanctioned money has not simply been utilised, and hence there are no utilisation certificates.

I would like to say one more thing. In an earlier conference, we noted that Majuli is likely to have significant benefits if the island gets the Unesco World Heritage status. For the third time in 2012, the World Heritage Committee rejected the application from the Government of India on the specific grounds

that all necessary documents were not complete as per the latest operational Guidelines. Tragically, no nomination dossiers were submitted when the 38th session of the World Heritage Committee was held in Doha in 2014. And my understanding is that no dossiers have been submitted for the 2016 session either. Now the question is: why have not the dossiers been submitted for 2016? And what are the people of Assam or Majuli doing about it? The answer is nothing. And if we take the lead, we threatened to stay away.

Fundamentally, the main function of AFGB, as an effective lobbying group, is to draw attention of the people and the governments of Assam and India to the serious socio-economic problems of Assam, and to analyse and discuss these problems in search of solutions. This is what we shall endeavour to achieve.

Joi Ai Axom !

Thank you.