

AFGB Conference 2015

Executive Summary

The 4th Annual Conference of Assam Forum GB was held at the London School of Economics on 5th September 2015. Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal sent a good will message appreciating the efforts of the Assamese diaspora to contribute towards solving the problems of Assam. The conference opened with a brief address by the AFGB Chairman. Three burning issues of Assam were discussed in this year's conference, namely, (1) "Crisis of ethnic identity: who is an Assamese?", a paper presented by Ms. Smitana Saikia and discussed by Nironkush Rick Das; (2) "Gender Issues in Assam", a paper presented by Dr. Rituparna Sarma and Ms. Rimli Das, and discussed by Dr. Amit Sarmah (and in his absence, Dr. Neera Borkakoti read out the written comments from Dr. Sarmah); and (3) A Panel discussion on poor governance in Assam and how corruption has become institutionalised in Assam. The Panel members were Dr. Apurba Baruah, Dr. Jitendralal Borkakoti, Mr. Zaved Choudhury and Dr. Dinesh Kakati.

Chairman's Address¹:

The Chairman of AFGB, Dr. Jitendralal Borkakoti, begins his address by welcoming the participants and by thanking Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal, Minister of State (IC) in the Modi Government, for his kind message² expressing appreciation for the Assamese diaspora for organizing such a conference to discuss the urgent issues of Assam. A special welcome was accorded to Dr. Ivan Weir from Newcastle University, Dr. Ritu Katakya from Durham University, Mr. Dan Range from Coventry University, Dr. Suman Singh and Dr. Muraree Meena, both from Benaras Hindu University, and Mr. Dhruva Barthakur who is one of the top executives of Facebook in London.

Referring to the 2014 conference, the Chairman has stated that the Executive Summary of the conference discussions was submitted to the Chief Minister of Assam with a copy to the Chief Secretary of the Government of Assam. The 2014 conference has drawn attention to the flood and erosion problems of Assam in general and, in particular, to the steady annihilation of

Majuli, and revealed inaction and gross inefficiency of the Government of Assam and sheer incompetence of the Brahmaputra Board in this regard.

Then the Chairman takes the opportunity to point out a few decisions that emerged in the last three conferences organized by AFGB, and to compare the same with what are being currently discussed in the political circles of Assam. On the Bangladeshi issue, the following were pointed out in the 2013 conference. (1) If we are to succeed in deporting illegal migrants to Bangladesh, an international treaty between India and Bangladesh is required. Our meeting with the High Commissioner of Bangladesh in London on 20 May 2013 has revealed that the Government of India has never raised this issue with Bangladesh. Only about six months back, Assam Assembly has woken up to demand a treaty between India and Bangladesh. (2) We advocated a policy of prevention and assimilation. Regarding prevention of Bangladeshis entering Assam, we note with regret that not only the border fencing has not been completed, but also the riverine routes remain free for illegal migrants to come and go as they like. (3) Regarding the matter of detecting and deporting illegal migrants, we advised more resources. The Government has actually increased the number of Tribunals; but the tragedy is that the convicted migrants disappear.

On the perennial flood problem of Assam, the following were pointed out in the 2014 conference. (1) Dredging the Brahmaputra was not a policy option. China failed to canalize the Howangho by dredging, and finally constructed 11 dams to control flood. In March 2015, the Government of Assam mooted to review a dead proposal of dredging the Brahmaputra. It simply will not work as the Brahmaputra is one of the biggest carriers of sediments in the world. (2) The conference exposed extremely poor governance in the matter of flood control. IIT Guwahati carried out a thorough study of the Guwahati flash flood in 1999; water flows were identified and accordingly technical solutions were recommended. But because of the lack of a central authority to implement the various construction works, there was administrative chaos, and the plan was not implemented. The project failed. And Guwahati is still suffering today in 2015 from that failure! (3) Regarding Majuli's erosion problems, the conference exposed the incompetence of the Brahmaputra Board. In 1996, a Master Plan was proposed, and only after 7 years, in 2003, the Brahmaputra Board came up with a detailed plan, involving Rs.96.56 crore, to be completed by 2006-07. The Board miserably failed to implement the projects of the Plan.

However, all these issues are raised in the Memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister of India in January 2015 in New Delhi. Mr. Ajit Duval accepted the memorandum on behalf of the Prime Minister. AFGB also met Ms. Uma Bharti and her Additional Secretary Dr. Amarjit Singh to discuss the flood problems in Assam and lobbied to get the failed Majuli project to be revived. With the replacement of Brahmaputra Board by the significantly empowered NEBRRRA, Assam Forum GB hopes that things will change very rapidly.

Fundamentally, the role of AFGB is to highlight the problems of Assam, to galvanize the people both here and in Assam to realise the seriousness of the problems, and to think and find solutions to the problems.

Crisis of Ethnic Identity: who is an Assamese? ³

“Who is an Assamese?” is a politically and socially urgent question. It is a complex question since Assamese identity is not primordial, but is a consequent result of centuries-old historical process that has fused multiple identities together. It is thus a socially fixed identity. Assam has received successive arrivals of immigrants; and none of them can claim racial or ethnic purity or majority.

The modern Assamese identity that was being forged in the early 20th century was exclusively defined on the basis of a standardized language. In the colonial era, two factors that brought different segments of the Assamese society closer, and then causing a rapid fragmentation are: (a) the struggle to regain the status of the Assamese language and (b) the increasing pressure on cultivable land as a result of government induced immigration. However, identity formation gained more traction when it was posited against the ‘other’ social groups; and at different times, this was done vis-à-vis different communities (for example, Bengali Hindus, Biharis, Nepalis, or Bangladeshi immigrants). But this historical process based on otherness was fraught with inherent contradictions. The Assamese Middle class had been trying to forge a multi-ethnic mould of the Assamese society on the one hand, but also had been obsessed with a unilingual homogeneous identity on the other hand. Fundamentally, the crisis of defining a modern Assamese identity is simply a manifestation of this inherent contradiction.

The *Axomiyas* had taken for granted that all the constituent groups (Bodo-Kachari, Mising, Tiwa, Karbi, Koch etc.) under the social “umbrella of Assamese” would naturally assimilate with it. But this was a false expectation on the part of the *Axomiyas*. The declaration of Assamese as the official language of the state in 1961 was met with vehement protests from various

non-Assamese speaking linguistic groups. The movement for a separate Plain Tribes State or Union Territory, led by the Plain Tribal Council of Assam – a party dominated by Bodos – was already brewing. These developments made it amply clear that Bodos were not eager in the process of ‘Assamisation’. What was problematic was that the *Axomiyas* were expecting the Bodos and other ethnic communities to ‘naturally’ accept the Assamese language and identity at the cost of their own language and culture.

The identity crisis of the Assamese was acutely felt when the issue of illegal immigration and inclusion of aliens in electoral rolls began to gain traction in the late 1970’s. With the discovery of 60,000 recently-registered people (who could not prove their Indian identity) in the electoral list of a Parliamentary constituency, people of Assam feared that Assam was being inundated by ‘illegal foreigners’ who would soon take over the State with its demographic strength. Therefore, Assamese identity, land and culture needed to be protected from these interlopers – a strong sentiment that was reflected in Clause 6 of the Assam Accord that states: “Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the culture, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people”. It, thus, became necessary to define who an Assamese is, as the Government of India sought clarification.

The previous definitions, that attempted to decide who would qualify as an Assamese, 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. Each parameter has been subject to political contestations. The problem is that the process of defining a social group involves creating fixed immutable identities whereas identities are inherently fluid and products of cultural osmosis. One can define **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); but **a social/cultural identity** cannot have an absolute definition.

The conclusion is that “who an Assamese is” cannot be defined, and we should abandon this obsession with trying to define our identity in the social/cultural mould. Instead, we should shift our focus to creating a “consensus-identity” or a civic Assamese identity which recognises that individuals have multiple identities and that each identity can coexist with the other identities. This civic identity is fundamentally based on the principle of

jus soli, that is, anyone born in Assam can claim the civic identity of being an Assamese, while maintaining a host of other identities. It thus boils down to the simple statement: you are an Assamese because you are born in Assam.

The closest definition of what constitutes the Assamese identity based on the 'principle of proximity' has come from the Assam Cabinet in 1989:

"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 are at present residing within these boundaries or all genuine citizens who accepted the local language(s) and culture(s) of Assam as their own". That is, the Assamese identity is detached from its exclusive/singular ethnic marker of a particular language, and it clearly returns to a more composite identity that encompasses languages and dialects spoken in the Assam.

Clause 6 of the Assam Accord is based on an outdated and untenable principle of exclusion and discrimination. This Clause, because of the lack of an answer to the question of who an Assamese is, cannot be implemented. Hence, this Clause should be amended to include the civic identity of an Assamese as discussed above. The emphasis should be on Clause 7 because it is only through fast economic development and material welfare with rising standard of living that the Assamese people can move forward with confidence to build an inclusive and progressive society.

Gender Issues in Assam⁴

The reality of gender inequality in India is very complex and diversified, because it is present in many ways, many fields and many classes. Basically, gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys.

The North-East region is multi-ethnic with heterogeneous cultural background and is different from mainstream homogeneous culture. Due to the prevalence of tribal and indigenous culture in the North-East region, it is generally perceived that women of the region are relatively much liberal than the rest of the country and that women of the region are equal partners with their male counterparts in different spheres of lives. This belief is that the entire North-Eastern region is almost free from social evils like dowry, *sati pratha*, female foeticide and infanticide. However various gender studies do reveal a totally different picture.

According to the 2011 census, male population in Assam constitutes about 49% of the total population and women 52%. There is not much inequality in relation to literacy rates and the average is only slightly below the national

figure. Although the gap is about 11% between males and females, there has been a 24% decadal improvement. Female work participation is another indicator of women's status in the society. The female work participation rate (FWPR) in Assam is considerably lower than that of men in general, except in the primary sector where the percentage is slightly better.

Unfortunately, the harsh reality is that women in Assam are still shackled to traditions, customs, age-old superstitious beliefs including witch hunting. Dowry system, early marriage, and permanent widowhood are still a major source of misery for women in Assam. They remain suppressed by their husbands and in-laws, spend most of their time in household chores; and they remain economically dependent throughout life and are viewed as inferior in a male dominated society. Nationally, the FWPR in urban areas is half of that in rural areas and the male figures are very similar. In Assam, the male WPR in both rural and urban areas is hovering around 53%-56% and female WPR is 15% and 23% respectively in urban and rural areas.

The next form of gender inequality is violence against women which is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relation between men and women and have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men. Against the backdrop of unabated violence against women in various parts of the country, there has been a spurt in the number of crimes against females in Congress-ruled Assam over the last decade. According to official records, heinous crimes like rape as well as social evils such as dowry and witch-hunting had claimed the lives of 1,589 women in the state during 2005-2014. The crimes against women have been rising since 2009, noting that these are only reported cases. There are probably hundreds of cases not reported for various reasons.

Another major issue is of missing children especially minor girls and women. A large number of cases are reported under Section 366-A for inducing minor girls (under 18 years) into trafficking for sexual exploitation. Human trafficking has been identified as the business of human beings for the purpose of begging, prostitution or forced labour. The exact number of trafficked victims in Assam as well as in India is not known as it is an illegal activity. Most common trafficking route or the destination from Assam is Siliguri, Chennai, Goa, Mumbai, Haryana, Punjab, Bihar and Delhi. The Indo-Bhutan border districts like Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar, Mangaldai, Udalguri and Barak valley districts are most prone for immoral trafficking including Char or riverine areas where certain communities like Bodo, Nepali, Adivasi (tea tribes), Rabha, Rajbonshi etc. live. Poverty, ethnic conflicts, child marriage, unemployment, lure of job in big cities, natural calamities, fake marriage, increasing

urbanisation, lack of educational facilities; open border, sex tourism, demand for domestic help in metros, are some major reasons behind trafficking.

The impact of trafficking has been harder on girls. Around half of the girls trafficked from Assam are estimated to end up in brothels in the metros. Around 10 women are abducted in Assam on a daily basis, and most of them become victims of trafficking. NDTV reports state that 2,740 women have been kidnapped in Assam since January 2013, and all of them un-traced. Despite 65 years of independence, the benefits of economic development have not trickled down to the larger section of the society and as a result millions of people still live below the poverty line. The incidence of poverty has increased in the North-Eastern states of the country, especially in Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland during the recent years. Because of poverty, the traffickers often visit the parents of the children and convinced them of higher income with job in economically advanced areas like Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Kerala, etc. The fact that almost 80 to 85 per cent of the victims comes from the poorest section of the society in Assam. What we must also look at, however, is the worrying conviction rates of these cases. The conviction rate of cases of sex trafficking across the country was only 22% in 2012. In the states with high numbers of sex trafficking cases, Assam had the lowest conviction rate of 1%. West Bengal and Maharashtra also have very low conviction rates, 4% & 5%, respectively.

The Government of Assam has taken various steps to combat trafficking such as: Anti Human Trafficking Cell has been created at CID headquarters, child welfare committees have been created in districts, a continuous process of training and sensitisation on Human Trafficking for officers are going on at the National level as well at the CID headquarters. In addition, optimum vigilance in Railway stations/ bus stops is taking place that can thwart organised rackets and identify the culprits for firm legal action.

Unfortunately, the existing laws have not been properly defined and there are loopholes that allow the perpetrators of human trafficking escape punishment. To combat human trafficking, several short-term and long-term measures are needed to be taken up at all levels. The most important of them is the urgent need to create awareness among the public about human trafficking. Here, print and television media can play a very effective role. Local NGOs may arrange meeting on gender sensitisation and programme on women trafficking at soft target areas of the traffickers. The involvement of the trafficked victims and motivating them to tell their story can be a very useful measure to prevent potential victims suffering such social evils.

We should develop an institutionalised system of co-ordination between the law enforcement agencies and NGOs who sometimes prove to be more effective than government agencies in exposing human trafficking networks. There should be greater co-ordination between different states in India as trafficking has a long trail from the source point to the destination with several transit points in between. Investigation in the cases involving human trafficking should be carried out with the aim to destroy the long chain. To achieve an effective response, the increased co-ordination between government departments like police, public welfare, health, women and child is required. At the same time, the cooperation of Government and NGOs is necessary to ensure post-rescue rehabilitation of the victims in terms of providing them healthcare, education and other employment opportunities.

Poor Governance and Transparency in Assam

(Panel Discussion: Dr. Jitendralal Borkakoti (Chair), Dr. Apurba Baruah, Mr. Zaved Chowdhury and Dr. Dinesh Kakati)

Dr. Jitendralal Borkakoti started with a few introductory comments on good governance. Good governance will imply how efficiently the state departments or institutions are run, how efficiently the public services like education and healthcare are delivered, to what extent the Police succeed in maintaining the law and order, and how efficiently the planned social and economic projects are completed. One of the prime reasons of why Assam has been lagging behind the rest of India is poor governance and lack of transparency which is a euphemism for blatant corruption.

Good governance is a necessary condition for rapid economic and social development. The Commission for Africa, established by the Blair government in Britain, produced a Report on the problems of Africa. They point out that good governance has three important components. These are: Capacity building, Accountability and Transparency. Capacity building involves having professional, dedicated and honest staff to deliver health, education and other services, to collect and manage data, and to debate and develop policies. Accountability is “fundamental to the legitimacy of a state and to the freedom and human rights of its people”. Governments must answer to all their people, including the poorest and the most vulnerable, and not just the elites and particular groups or tribes. Persons, who take the responsibility and run the government, must be accountable to the people at all levels: local, provincial and central. Transparency is a vital component of governance. Openness about policies and deci-

sions makes it easier to hold governments to account for their actions. It makes it more likely that existing resources and capacity will be better used, and corrupt practices will be weeded out.

Mr. Zaved Chowdhury takes up a few cases of poor governance in Assam in terms of these characteristics of good governance.

There are many examples of gross inefficiencies in Assam. Central funds for projects under Five Year Plans could not be utilised, and the unutilised funds have been returned to the Centre. During the period from 2001-02 fiscal year to 2012-13, the total allocation under Five Year Plan was Rs. 56,548 crore out of which only Rs. 13,093 crore has remained unutilised (noting that 1 crore is 10 million). That is, 23% of the resources were not used. That unused resources work out to be ₹1.3 billion. That's a huge sum of money. And the people of Assam are let down.

In March 2015, Shatanau Basu, the Principal Accountant General of Assam, made a statement. He said that Budget surrender and undrawn amounts pointed to ineffective scheme monitoring and evaluation. Being a special category State, Assam receives a substantial amount of grants, but most of the money remained unspent. In the year 2011-12 alone, Assam had an unspent balance amounting to more than 25% of the total appropriation.

Different Departments have been pointed out. Although Assam is hit by floods every year, the Water Resources Department failed to use funds allocated to it during the 10 years from 2002-03 to 2011-12. The failure to utilise funds was to the tune of 38% to 60%. Similarly, funds had to be surrendered in key sectors like social security, urban development, roads and bridges, power, healthcare etc. This inefficient governance has seriously affected economic development. The Accountant General also revealed that power shortage was compounded by 26% transmission and distribution loss. This we find to be highest in the world.

Fundamentally, the lack of capacity building is responsible for this failure to utilise the Central funds, with the dubious distinction of achieving the lowest utilisation rate by the Government of Assam.

The CAG Reports (that is, Comptroller & Auditor General of India) have always been very critical. These reports are freely available on line. In the latest report, CAG detects glaring anomalies in implementation of various schemes by the State Irrigation Department. A quote from their report will give a good idea of what has been going on.

“Not a single major/medium project was completed within the stipulated period. The projects remained incomplete for 33 to 38 years since inception of the schemes/projects. Without completing the ongoing schemes, minor irrigation

schemes (MIS) were taken up without financial sanction from the Ministry of Water Resources of the Government of India”.

In April 2015, CAG has slammed the Assam Government for failing submit 20,000, yes, 20,000, Utilisation certificates pending from 58 Departments amounting to Rs. 12,000 crore, from 2001-02 to 2013-14.

Dr. Apurba Baruah discusses the problem of large-scale corruption in Assam.

If one reads the CAG reports on Assam, one's eyes are filled with tears. CAG finds “serious financial irregularities” including funds being released in excess of budgetary provisions. There have been scam after scam running into thousands of crores of rupees, but nobody seems to get caught or punished, and eventually and tragically, everything gets dumped into the dustbin of history, and the criminals live happily ever after. The most serious type of corruption arises from the unholy nexus of politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. The national funds meant for development and poverty alleviation have been regularly, methodically and blatantly looted by the greedy unpatriotic thugs.

One common *modus operandi* is false LOC, as in the alleged scam involving supply to hospitals and veterinary department, and also in the scam involving salary for fictitious or ghost employees, as alleged in the case of Assam Police Battalion based at Kahilipara. There are allegedly ghost school teachers, there are also allegedly ghost pensioners in Guwahati medical College; and many such cases. There is wide spread corruption in the PDS system. There is diversion of 25% of the PDS commodities. The corrupt officials literally take the money meant for the poorest of the society.

This wide-spread cancer of corruption has to be taken out of the body politic. We have to demolish kleptocracy within the structure of democracy. With firm determination and strong leadership, this could be done. In Bihar, the Nitish administration has convicted 38,000 people, including dozens of politicians, for violating the Arms Act. Peace and confidence returned to Bihar, and new businesses began to appear. Bihar currently enjoys about 9% rate of growth.

In Assam we must begin this process of fast track trials, convictions and imprisonment. And we are hoping that the Modi government will start a process like that.

Dr. Dinesh Kakati carries out a discussion on bombastic promises given by politicians with a case study of the Look East Policy in Assam.

Politicians from Delhi or from Dispur often deliver speeches by promising the world to the people of Assam; and people's expectations are raised. There are Newspaper headlines. Unfortunately these promises or aspirations do not get translated into reality.

One such example of bombastic promise is the Look East Policy, or LEP. When India launched LEP, some 24 years back, in 1991, it was exciting news. But the issue of geographical proximity of the North East region, facilitating physical connectivity to South East Asia, did not loom large until Myanmar in 1997 became a full member of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations).

Indian policy makers realised the importance of the physical connectivity, and initiated a few bilateral and multilateral projects. The Look West Policy (LWP) was launched by Thailand in 1997; and there has been significant growth in bilateral trade between India and Thailand. LEP and LWP policies are symbiotic, but bilateral trade took place mainly through sea routes. Still after 22 years, we do not have the necessary infra-structure built through the North East to make LEP a reality.

Only after the India-ASEAN car rally from Guwahati in 2004, Thailand realised the potent potentiality of physical connectivity geographically facilitated by the North East. This led to the visit to Assam by a Thai delegation in 2007, and the group identified agro-business, food-processing, energy, transport and tourism as areas for investment. Nothing much has happened since then.

For the North East, the crucial issues are the following: first, the completion of road and railways infra-structure connecting the North East and the South East Asia is vital for any realistic boost from LEP to the North East. India is supposed to spend Rs.15,000 crores for this purpose, and we do not know whether some progress has been made. Second, inflow of foreign direct investment from the South East to Assam and other States is crucially conditional upon creating a proper economic environment both in terms of adequate provisions of infra-structure and prevalence of law and order. Third, even if we succeed in building the infrastructure that is capable of carrying millions of tonnes of cargo, Assam and the other NE states must have production units to produce quality goods that could be exported when that opportunity finally arrives. We do not have major world class manufacturing industries in the North East. In the absence of these, economic benefits from LEP remain merely an aspiration – a dream inspired by the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's speeches when he visited Assam. And the politicians like parrots keep repeating this as a great strategy to galvanize the North East region, but nothing concrete has been happening.

General discussion: In the ensuing discussion, a question of the size of the country is raised. Is a large country like India is relatively more prone to bad governance and corruption? But this need not necessarily be the case because a state like Assam (with a population of 32 million) within India is primarily governed by the Government of Assam whose responsibility it is to make sure

that good governance prevails. Also, another question was raised regarding the role of poverty in generating corruption. Poor countries tend to be corrupt; and it is possible that poverty combined with aspiration of the citizens in a rapidly changing world could give rise to corruption. And once corruption starts, it grows roots to engulf the society. In other words, corruption becomes institutionalised.

The Vigilance Commission in Assam should be given more power and also resources to fight corruption. The media should take a keen interest in exposing corruption. The citizens also have an important role in not cooperating to get things done by bribing corrupt officials.

Thus good governance requires sincerity, logical thinking, advanced planning, well-thought out projects, and a strong political will to pursue a policy with the necessary allocation of resources. When inefficiency becomes institutionalised, we have a serious problem to break that mould. This can be done only by a determined leader like Modi; and the people of Assam must take advantage of this historical opportunity.

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1. The Chairman's Speech.
2. Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal's Letter
3. The Crisis of Identity: Who is an Assamese?
4. Power point presentation Gender Discrimination in Assam.
5. Gender Discrimination in Assam: A Reality Check

Prepared by Dr. Jitendralal Borkakoti