

Assam's Ethnic Diversity and Need for Institutional Reform

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The issue of 'Citizenship' has often stirred pulsating discussions in a democratic and federal India. The Constitution of India has addressed the rights and representation of Indian citizens through its various provisions. There is definitely an intimate relation between rights and obligations. The State is responsible for protecting the citizen's rights and the citizen's duty is to fulfill certain responsibility towards the state. A comprehensive approach is given to the relation between state and its people, between the governing and the governed. One cannot be diluted in lieu of the other; if the gap between the two is unduly stretched then we fail to comply with the basic fundamentals of democratic governance.

Democratic governance in its actual worth is a two-way process of interaction between the state and society. Individuals of a democratic state would be content of their rights met and obligations fulfilled if they do not see a disjuncture between the role they play as a citizen of the state and the role they play as a member of the society.

Such coherence becomes more difficult task when state, as a single political system, needs to address a diverse multi-ethnic society. India, like many modern states, after independence from the colonial power believed that multi-ethnicity can be tackled if the project of building a nation-state is taken in right earnest. The idea was to build a political community irrespective of cultural diversity, bounded by bonds of citizenship and nationality. But such endeavours have often been met with protest from regional quarters of the Indian state. National citizenship was thus seen only as a project of building modern state and never a fulfillment of representation of diverse cultural groups. This phenomenon is best illustrated while considering the case of Assam whose demography is ethnically diverse, thus posing manifold challenges to governance.

The national political leadership had assumed that all ethnic cultural interest would be taken care of by seamless principles of democracy and federalism, which are neatly drawn in the Constitution. But, only by framing a colossal arrangement of institutions, interests cannot be served. Diverse groups of Assam had been either demanding separate and autonomous state on the basis of their lingo-cultural identities or constitutional protection of their respective identities. Even the civil society in Assam lies fragmented.

Authors like *Neera Chandoke* define civil society as the one that stands by the universalistic criteria of citizenship. She states that any association which excludes persons on the basis of

ethnicity or class or religious persuasion, for example, is clearly not a part of civil society.[¹] But, civil society in Assam is organised on the considerations of ethnic comradeship. It cannot be denied that both colonial and post-colonial experience has fuelled the diversity and generated dissonance among ethnic groups.

Questions of ‘Representation’

Assam had drastically opposed the unitary tone at the time when the Constitution was being framed; it was particularly concerned with the mode of citizenship drawn up by the draft Constitution. It was not only the question of single citizenship that was troubling the state leaders but also the clause in *Article 6* of the draft Constitution by which the Indian Parliament was empowered to make further provisions regarding the acquisition and termination of Citizenship.

The Assamese elite argued that single citizenship was not sufficient to protect the provincial identity of Assam. The state possessed certain features, which were unlike other states of India. Hence, a common citizenship would insufficiently address its peculiarities. Concept of citizenship must include regional and cultural interests. The main cause underlying such stand was the threat of rising immigrant population in Assam. Dual citizenship imposes certain restriction on free settlement of individuals moving from one unit to another and whereas single citizenship might encourage more immigrants into the state. The obvious implication of such arguments of the Assamese elite was that if the determination of citizenship was not vested in the provinces, their political power might pass into the hands of the immigrants under adult franchise; and they might cease to be a dominant group in Assam.[²]

The *Assam Tribune*, Assam’s popular daily, asserted; “The states must have the power to define the conditions of the acquisition of domicile in accordance with their own peculiar problems. An Indian citizen cannot automatically claim all the civil and political rights throughout the Indian Union. The right of an Indian citizen will be exclusive of the rights of domicile in a particular state.”[³]

The Assamese leadership expressed the desire for a ‘union without unity’. Such interests were shaped by the historical onslaught that Assam had faced, as a colonial unit of the British imperial power. In awe of serious demographic changes, the Assamese elites felt a threat to their dominant status. Even during the struggle for independence of India, considerable consciousness of Assamese subnationalism had already taken a strong root along with the pan-Indian national project. Thus, Assamese national mobilisation came to occupy a central stage in Assam politics.

Clash of identities and conflict over space exists not only between the national and regional groups but also between various sub regional groups. Assam has never been a monolingual region; people from different races, speaking different dialects and languages, have made Assam their homeland. Therefore, ‘internal integration’ under the banner of a common Assamese identity received a set back because other ethnic groups did not want to merge their culture completely and demanded the protection of their respective identities.

Even when such dissent was evident owing to the multitude of ethnic groups, the national leadership had always avoided the question of how to accommodate these issues into the political institution and had always nonchalantly sidelined them as fissiparous tendencies.

The strength of a multi-ethnic democratic federation lies in structuring political processes in ways that make public policies responsive to multiple public spheres. However, India's federal structure had been more so a formality. A deliberative democracy, writes *Habermas*, must depend on "anonymously interlinked discourses or flows of communication"; it does not depend on their being an "inclusive public sphere as a whole" or macro-subjects like a single "people" or "community". Such a political public sphere may be fuelled by spontaneous sources, but for it to work there would have to be "a networking of different communications flows."^[4]

Policy of Bargain and Compromise

Communication has always been a top-down process and the Central as well as state political leaders have favoured policies that would help in consolidating their power and position. If we take an account of the policies initiated by the Central and state governments in the North-East region, they would speak of only a 'bargain and compromise' attitude. Successive governments have been only interested in finding momental solace, compromising with groups and abide by their few wishes, gaining few accolades and stabilising its legitimacy. Those who do not gain from such compromise raise demands to bargain their due share of attention; attention is showered on them and again another compromise is reached. The results are not very optimistic as it often leads to trail of ethnic conflicts.

Ethnic conflicts generally decompose the potentiality of a multi-ethnic society whereas ethnic differences can be composed into a viable project of multi-dimensional participation. Be it factional political leaders, mass media or middle-class intelligentsia, they have always pitted one ethnic group against the other. If we see from the chronicle of ethnic clashes of interests, and speculate on how these issues has been addressed, chances of findings are mostly of the growing marginalisation of the average citizen. This has led to shrinking of the democratic space and creating wide-spread commotion within the civil society.

Assam has a long history of strong civil society which participated and protested any form of arbitrary rule. The common people of Assam have inherited such strong sense of participation from its traditional rural institutions, *Rajmels* (People's Assembly). The 'mels' were the common platform of resistance against any policies of the British administration that fail to be conducive to people. Peasant movements had been examples of such strengths like, *Phulaguri Dawa* of 1861^[5] and the revolt of 1894 known as the *Battle of Patharughat*⁶. These were people's movement sans class distinction and social differences. Similarly, *Ryot Sabhas* were created in urban areas.

The civil society of Assam therefore cannot be said to be undeveloped, it has an enriched civil society with a strong sense of participation. There cannot be a clearer example than the Assam Movement (1979-85), which was initiated and sustained by the civil society. The Movement challenged the state's arbitrary rule and misgovernance of handling such important national and

public issue of 'citizenship'; i.e. non-citizens inclusion into the voter's list⁷ was their main agenda. The *Asom Sahitya Sobha* and the All Assam Student's Union (AASU) are the two major organizations that have led the citizen movement. But what was supposed to be citizen's movement, started as a peaceful protest of citizens, was later dragged into a severe crisis of govern-ability due to reckless strategies of government leaders and turned out to be a violent rupture between ethnic groups.

The Assamese civil society was successful in bargaining with the central government, on the policy of enfranchising foreigners. A compromise was reached in the form of the Assam Accord (1985). It promised . . . to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.[⁸] The Centre's promise of protection of Assamese people in the Accord spurred fresh tensions. Plain tribals united under the banner of Bodo identity and strongly voiced that such compromise would not benefit them, strongly asserting, 'we are Bodos and not Assamese.'

Tensions and clashes between ethnic groups have crushed the common man and woman. Government has not been able to protect the fundamental rights which should have come natural to any individual being a citizen. The common citizen struggling to fulfill his basic needs of survival, finds his/her only solace in ethnic comradeship. Leaders of the autonomy movements seek the support from the common people by showing an attractive picture of containment and happiness, that his rights would be met within their ethnic territory. It is through their support that ethnic elites bargain with the Centre and carve out a niche for themselves.

'Sons of the Soil': India's marginalized citizens

The federal structure created under constitutional provision gave no place for autonomy and the constitution was given a participative tone, with citizens having equal role and rights within the federation. It was argued that only when equality was denied autonomy was justified. The Constitution had incorporated Fifth and the Sixth Schedule to respect cultural and economic rights of tribals. This was mainly drawn to bring the tribals in the common arena of development along with other group, so that they are never exploited and marginalised. Within years after framing of the Constitution, autonomy movements became the mainstay of survival in the battlefield of politics.

Every ethnic group in Assam has been making a claim that their needs are not adequately protected and their right to resources has been subjugated. Their right to development has been bargained in favour of other groups. By development, the constitution of India means the process of governance, while respecting human rights of all persons, secures for all Indians, freedom from material impoverishment.[⁹] But with scarcity of economic resources, no groups were willing to give space to others for enhancing their capacity. The only resource that was aplenty, at hands, was their ethnic solidarity of woes that could be sharpened to get some share of development.

The development model that India pursued of steering development from above has exasperated the existing inequalities along regional and ethnic lines. The resulting dissatisfaction among people provided raw materials for the elite-led movement. Ethnic elites mobilized the already

vulnerable citizen, and made an emotive appeal of their state of despair. 'Sons of the Soil' felt that they were resourceless in their capacity to take the benefits of modernisation and opportunities would pass into hands of outsiders, who were more resourceful. The indigenous ethnic group felt culturally dominated, economically exploited and politically oppressed and aliens were extracting all benefits of which the natives had a rightful share. Since as an individual and as a citizen they failed, a collective organised front would help them enhance their bargaining power with the state of India to get out of the situation that shackled their hands in poverty and labelled them as India's marginalised citizen.

It did not take long for policy planners and analysts to realize that these movements for identity assertion were actually the result of modernisation process and that the entire approach to nation-building need to be re-appraised. Political vacuum gripped the state leading to further fragmentation of the civil society. Violence and ethnic tensions robbed the civility of the people. The vacuum was filled in with radicalism of militant group who seek a drastic solution of protecting identities. The situation in Assam looked similar to Hobbesian state of nature of everyone at war with one another. Coercive measures taken by the state to repress the militant activities has led to more violence. The average citizen is torn between the state and militant violence and has been struggling to get his/her democratic space.

The question that arises today is why the people of Assam seem to be so powerless? The Assam Movement's unsuccessfulness in its mission has been a showcase of such powerlessness. Rather in the period aftermath, more conflicts were borne that segregated the various language groups. The various councils like the North East Council(NEC), Bodo Autonomous Council(BAC), and such others were set up to cater to the needs and interests of various ethnic groups have been almost defunct. Institutional reform is the need of the hour if we seek to harness people's participation and democratic governance. Such issues cannot be rendered to backseat in a multi-ethnic demographic composition. The governance in Assam faces challenges from the unresolved territorial disputes, widespread poverty, rise in population and teeming migration; the lists of problems are endless. With abdication of responsibilities by state governance, its sole relief comes from funds given by the Centre. With crippled economic capital there cannot be empowerment of social relations; hence, strained economic relations leads to degeneration of social relations.

The state needs a climatic change in handling public policies and bureaucratic functioning. Inclusion of voices of diverse ethnic groups of Assam is important for strong governance. Assam has faced time and again the question, 'who are the citizens of Assam?' There have been claims and counter-claims by each ethnic group, speaking of their indigenous right to resources. A conventional developmental discourse of greater allocations of funds from the Centre to solve the instability of the regions has made the region more defunct, profiting the politician-bureaucrat-insurgent network. Solutions to such problems can be found within the institutions of democracy and federalism if principled and implemented in right earnest.

Ethnic groups as 'citizens'

T. N. Madan in 'Perspectives on Pluralism' has acknowledged the essence of Gandhi's thoughts. Gandhi has put the right idea in his thinking on pluralism, he brought the concept of

‘participatory pluralism’ overcoming the limitation of hierarchical model. Participatory pluralism to sustain itself requires material foundations. *Gandhi* thought about this essential requirement in terms of notions such as shared labour (group spinning was a key symbolic act) and ‘trusteeship.’^[10]

Empowerment of social relations is linked with economic empowerment and can be initiated even within the process of modernisation. Social cohesiveness with economic co-operation is not Greek to the people of Assam, as it is thought. Examples of such initiative can be found in Tezpur District *Mahila Samiti*, it is a concept based on community solidarity and co-operative village action. In *Pather Siam* village of Golaghat district, women from each of fifty-five households offer their services during sowing and harvesting. Women’s wages collected in the manner on a particular day go to the *Mahila Samiti* fund. In Assam, this collective strength is also reflective in weaving co-operatives and grain banks. Grain is loaned to people at fifty percent interest repayable in six months. Through the interest collected, yarn is purchased for weaving.^[11]

Ethnic diversity can be a boon if harnessed in the right way because social capital and value system are necessary for educating citizens. Robert Putnam says that it is the robust network between social and civil society organisation that he refers to as ‘social capital’ that can contribute to the capacity of society to help in human development. Social capital is essential to effective governance and its services are crucial. Culture can have a humanising effect on the society. Ethnicity can be a powerful tool in the creation of human and social capital but if politicised, ethnicity can prevent productive relationships.

Policies need to be formulated that can bring out India from the centralised straitjacket, policies that are not merely to assimilate and integrate India but which truly recognise a multi-ethnic plurality. Nation states regimetal purview of suppressing minority culture to bring coherence in national identity, has failed the test of time. It is not as if the leaders never recognised cultural diversity, but they failed to recognise cultural needs. People cannot just enter the public sphere as faceless citizens bearing no marks of ethnic, class or gender reference.

‘Rights’ that Constitution bestows on the Indian people by the recognition of citizenship cannot be an abstract notion without plural identities, as it is so often perpetuated. Rights are not merely meant to assure political and material advantages without extending respect to communities. Cultural marginalisation may become a threat to such an extent that groups tend to blame that their state of despair is because of the fact that they are culturally marginalised. Every citizen is a member of some cultural groups; hence marginalisation of any ethnic groups is bound to marginalise the rights that an individual is given as a citizen of the democratic order.

Consolidation and assimilation of identities should give way to devolution. So that ethnic groups can enhance their capacity as being a part of both national and regional or ethnic group. This calls for a re-appraisal on the perspective of regionalism. It must be realised that even smaller streams must have their rightful recognition in the creation of the national mainstream. It cannot be denied that the political state of India has large acceptance seeing the participation of Indian voters on the parliamentary politics, but the various sub-groups are apprehensive of their cultural integration, which they see as a threat to their identity. Democracy will be truly explicit when

there is dissemination of participation of ethnic groups as citizens; thereby 'citizenship' promotes inclusive federation.

Federalism, as an institutional arrangement, is ideally suited to protect cultural-territorial identities. But these institutions have failed to respond to people's needs. Every Government, which remains in power, look for arrangement that can appease ethnic groups for the time being and help them in electoral gain. The Congress had gained considerably in the electoral battles in Bodo dominated areas of lower Assam when it drew the proposal for Bodo Autonomous Council. Mere arrangements won't provide a viable solution, the BAC has failed to equip as the strength of Bodo people. These are ornamental showpiece that only equips elites for better bargain in siphoning away power and money.

Conciliation of one group leads to dissatisfaction of the other. The announcement of the Congress government plan in 2002 for creating Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) has led to series of agitation among non-Bodo tribal groups. They have demanded the same constitutional status that the government is planning to offer to the Bodos in the proposed BTC. At the same time, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) had strongly opposed the state government's statement that the Koch Rajbongshis and adivasi communities residing in BAC area be accorded tribal status. Such proposals of state government are mainly drawn to pacify ethnic groups from demanding bifurcation of Assam. But, unless there is a proper reform of reviving the essence of institutions committed to federalism and constitutional protection granted under the Sixth Schedule, Councils will remain as a benchmark of number of agreements signed by the government. And the political party constituting the government will use these data for gaining votes in elections.

Future challenges to governance can only be met when a comprehensive approach is laid, which sees a co-ordinated network between state and civil society. Government institutions are necessary for empowering the people and civil society interventions can step in to bring a link between the state and people. There is a need to bring the practise of public accountability. Assam can also take example from Nagaland and Andhra Pradesh where civil society groups have been working in close liaison with people and the state. Human potential should not go waste, the situation calls for people to work for people, sans class and ethnic diversity.

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References and Endnotes

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2. Phukon Girin, *Assam: Attitude to Federalism*, Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd., New Delhi, 1984, p.137.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

4. Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 12.
5. On September 1861, at Phulaguri (Nowgong district) about fifteen thousand peasants marched to the district town and demanded that the taxes on betel-nut and pan be withdrawn and that no further taxes be levied. People held meetings in which Lieutenant Singer was lynched, several peasant leaders were sentenced to imprisonment.
6. This incident took place at Patharughat in the Mangaldai sub-division on 28th January 1894. Thousand of people gathered to face the district magistrate of Darrang, because the government was bent on attaching properties of the peasants who refused to pay taxes.
7. Amiya Kumar Das says about the migration process, in “Assam’s Agony: A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis”, (1982; p.44) that, in spite of the size of voters increasing, and the population growth rate reaching to enormous surplus, only a small number has reported themselves as immigrants in 1971. The 1951 census reported 1,344,003 persons as immigrants in Assam (born outside Assam), out of which 388,288 were from East Pakistan and only 510,715 were from Nepal and other states of India. However all of them are now Indian citizens.
8. Sanjib Baruah, op. cit., no.4; p.116.
9. Asif Mohammad, ‘Development initiative and the Concomitant Issues in the North-East States’ in K.S. Agarwal (ed.), *Dynamics of Identity and Inter group relation in North-East India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1999, p. 41.
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11. ‘Social Cohesiveness In The North-East’, [http:// www. Healthlibrary.com](http://www.Healthlibrary.com).