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STATE, CIVIL SOCIETY AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN ASSAM

Ever since the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) raised the demand for the self-determination of nations and started fighting for *Swadhin Asom*, the Indian State has been relying on military and paramilitary forces to contain the insurgents in Assam. Different civil liberties organizations operating in India and abroad have brought to light gross violations of human rights by the Army and the paramilitary forces involved in anti-insurgency operations in the state. It is alleged that the armed forces have been harassing innocent civilians while attempting to apprehend the militants.

The regional press has brought to light numerous instances wherein innocent villagers were threatened, harassed, raped, assaulted and killed by soldiers during the interrogations (*Assam Watch*, 2000). Out of the fear of harassment by the Army and the paramilitary forces, thousands of villagers in the insurgency prone areas were forced to leave. Between 1991 and 2000 more than their homes thousand suspected militants were killed in army operations (Das Gupta 2000). On certain occasions, the Army officials themselves admitted to have acted on "specific information", but it was later found that the

victims were innocents having no relation to any on surgent groups. The families of such victims killed in the army operations did not receive any compensation from the State. Even though such cases of extra-judicial killings, torture, custodial death, disappearances and rapes came to the surface, the civil authorities could not probe into those cases. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 has given blanket immunity to the army personnel against any legal interference. The Unified Command system has also empowered the Army and paramilitary units to conduct search operations without any intervention from the state government. Even the National Human Rights Commission has no powers to look into cases of human rights' violations by the Army. It is noticed that even where some legal restrictions exist, the Army officers do not hesitate to flout them. The Army does not even pay attention to the rulings of the High Court and puts itself above the law of the land.

The human rights violations have been taking place in the anti-insurgency operations with the tacit consent of both the state and central governments. The erstwhile AGP government in Assam, which could not solve any of the basic problems of the people, had lent full support to the Army operations in the state. The state police have attacked the local media persons and human rights activists in the state, who dared to expose the atrocities committed in the anti-insurgency operations. In the period between 1997 and 1999 as many as 28 journalists were detained and harassed by the state administration under trumped-up charges. Parag Das, a well-known human rights activist and journalist, was killed by unidentified gunmen (*MASS* July 2000). Many people in Assam believe that the then AGP government took the help of the surrendered ULFA (SULFA) militants to settle scores with ULFA militants or their sympathizers. With the support of the government in power, SULFA was indulging in several unlawful and terrorist activities. Many cases of secret killings or mysterious deaths reported in the state seem to have been carried out by a section of the

police with the help of SULFA militants (*MASS* May 1999). Even in the recent incidents of kidnapping and killings of the kith and kin of ULFA militants, the hand of SULFA was suspected. It is quite unbecoming of a civilized government to seek the help of one militant group to settle scores with another militant group (*The Assam Tribune* January 9, 2001).

Politically conscious individuals and associations in the state have been condemning the violation of human rights by the Army, paramilitary and the government in power. But while condemning the atrocities committed by the state organs, one should not overlook the fact that the violation of human rights in Assam points out not only the increasing lawlessness on the part of the law enforcing agencies, but also the fragility of the civil society in Assam. An enlightened civil society, a "political public" - to put in the words of Habermas, is essential for the protection and promotion of human rights. Such a civil society encompasses an entire range of assumptions, values and institutions such as political, social and civil rights, the rule of law, plurality of associations, representative institutions and a public sphere. In a civil society there has to be a recognition that some common rules, based upon notions of the common good are needed, to bind the society across cultures. Emphasis on separateness and diversity, *per se*, without a debate on how these can be negotiated or how the common meanings of past and the present can be recovered, may lead to politics stripped of its normative concerns (Chandhoke 1998).

Liberal democracy cannot survive without there being a civil society based on certain amount of homogeneity, political consciousness, openness to competing claims and a sense of mutual trust. For a strong civil society to be built, the people should learn to rise above their familial and ethnic considerations and come together on the basis of enlightened self-interest. Rational secular thinking, tolerance of dissent and a sense of give and take are basic prerequisites of a healthy civil society (Schwedler 1995; Hall 1995:200-224). In Assam

although one comes across a few conscientious individuals and organizations, there is no strong civil society capable of defending the democratic rights of the people. Compared to the state, the civil society in Assam is so weak that it is incapable of defending itself against the dominating influence of the oppressive state organs. The civil liberties movement for protection of human rights will not be effective so long as one fails to comprehend and overcome the weak spots in the civil society.

Complex Nature of Civil Society in Assam

What we today call Assam never existed as a monolingual and single nationality state at any point of time in history as people belonging to different religions, nationalities, ethnic and linguistic groups inhabited the region (Das, 1987). Migration of people from other parts of the globe into this region is not a recent phenomenon. It is very difficult to point out who in this land constitutes the original inhabitants, as almost all groups seem to have come and settled in this region at different points of time in history. The Ahoms, who were instrumental in giving shape to the Assamese nationality, themselves came to this region from South East Asia in 12th century A.D. Although the Ahom and other kingdoms in the region were not directly under the control of any big empire or ruler that ruled Delhi, the region was not completely isolated and insulated from the Indian subcontinent. The Ahoms and other rulers in the region had economic and cultural ties with Bengal and North India (Acharyya 1992). Many religious leaders from other parts of India came and settled in Assam. Although the caste system could not penetrate deep into the society, Hinduism entered region long back with the tribal rulers taking the lead in embracing the faith.

No ruler of the region in the past had control of all parts of today's Assam. The Ahom rule, for long, was confined to Upper Assam. It was only during the 16th and 17th centuries that the Ahom extended their rule up to Lower Assam and also to

Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The Cachar plains never came under the control of the Ahoms. The Barak valley region in South Assam was earlier a part of the Surma valley in East Bengal. In 1874 the British clubbed it with the Commissionership of Assam for financial and administrative convenience (Gait 1992: 261-265)... The incorporation of Ahom kingdom into the British India and the creation of a Commissionership of Assam by clubbing the Bengali-dominant Surma valley region and tribal inhabited hilly areas of the Northeast, complicated the social and political processes in the region. For consolidating and continuing their colonial rule and exploitation, the British encouraged the immigration of Bengali Muslim peasants, the Marwaris and tribal people from other parts of the subcontinent into the region in large numbers (Guha 1977).

Although migration, as mentioned earlier, is not something new to the region, the immigration of more powerful nationalities, who gradually gained control over land, business and bureaucratic positions, did create a fear psychosis among the Assamese and other ethnic groups living in the region prior to the British takeover. Competition for limited social and economic space intensified the hostilities and prejudices among the ethnic groups during the colonial period. Although a section of the Assamese was exposed to liberal ideas of the West, Assam as a whole was not influenced by the Indian renaissance. By and large the people remained communitarian in thinking and could not give shape to a civil society based on the values of individualism, rationalism and secularism, a precondition for the successful functioning of a liberal democracy. The Assamese themselves were so overwhelmed by the fear of Bengali immigration that instead of building up an Assamese nationality on secular lines, they heavily depended on anti-Bengali feelings among the indigenous people to construct their identity as Assamese. Ethnic prejudices, fear of the outsiders and competition for limited resources and opportunities have further shrunk the possibilities of building up a strong civil society in Assam.

Indian independence has not helped much to overcome the situation. Assam, with its rich natural resources, could have made considerable economic progress, had the Assamese elites who took the reins of the state government after independence encouraged industrialization and mobilized all sections of the people living in the region to pressurize the central government for creating necessary conditions for the overall development of the region. Balanced development of the region together with non-hegemonic cultural policies could have kept the Assam united and strong. But neither economic development nor cultural unity of the people could be ensured due to the shortsighted policies of the government both at the centre and the state. Ignoring the multi-national and multi-lingual character of Assam, the Assamese leaders tried to impose the Assamese language on the minorities (Chaubey 1999). Their obsession with language and identity issues and their neglect of economic development left the people divided and the economy shattered.

Consequently, with no industries and infrastructure, Assam remained underdeveloped and neglected. With unemployment growing and the pressure on land mounting, the contradictions in the Assamese civil society started taking the form of ethnic conflicts and identity politics. The inability of the state to resolve the contradictions amongst different ethnic groups has led to the emergence of different militant groups in Assam.

Abuse of Human Rights by Militant Organizations

In one sense, militancy in Assam is a by-product of the Assam agitation in the early eighties. ULFA, which dared to challenge India's sovereignty over Assam, was only an offshoot of the Assam agitation. The birth of ULFA showed the way for other groups to float their own militant outfits to realize their demands. Today in addition to ULFA, many other militant organizations like BLTF, NDFB, Karbi-National Volunteers

(KNV), Dima Haram Daoga (DHD), United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), Koch Rajbanshi Protection Force, Rabha National Security Force, and Muslim United Liberation Tigers Association (MULTA) are active in Assam. Apart from these Assam based militant outfits, a few other militant groups active in the bordering states, such as NSCN (K), NSCN (I-M), People's United Liberation Front (PULF) and Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF), also operate in Assam. All the outfits claim to be working for protecting the interests of their communities. Their avowed goals range from protection of the interests of the 'natives' from the foreign immigrants, formation of an autonomous district/state, creation of a separate state within the Indian Union, to complete secession from the Indian Union.

All militant organizations operating in Assam accuse the Indian State of violating human rights. But these outfits do not admit that they also abuse human rights in their own ways while pursuing their professed goals. The Bodo militants, for example, while fighting for a separate state of Bodoland, pay no attention to the problems and feelings of other tribals and non-tribals living in the region for several decades. In pursuit of their demands, the Bodo militants massacred thousands of Santhals and Neo-Assamese Muslims in BARPETA, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts. The persons killed by them are no exploiters. The Santhals were the tribals who were forcefully brought to Assam by the British government for their colonial exploitation. The Neo-Assamese Muslims are poor Bengali migrant peasants who settled in Assam long before the partition and voluntarily assimilated Assamese language and culture. They do not have the strength to pose any threat to the Bodos. But that does not bar the Bodo militants from killing innocent people, including women and children, in their homes, fields, forests and villages. The militants have attacked even the refugees taking shelter in Banhbari relief camps and killed them while they were fast asleep.

Through extortion, looting and destruction, the Bodo militants have created terror among other communities and are forcing them to flee from the region. The NDFB militants served evacuation notices to the Bangladeshi settlers and started extorting money from them to the tune of Rs. 5000 per family. In November 2000 they attacked woodcutters, tied them to trees and tortured them before killing them with spears, machetes and guns. The Bodo militants have become so intolerant that they not only attack the so-called outsiders, but also kill their own brethren who do not support their policies and programs. The gunning down of Binneshwar Brahma, a prominent moderate Bodo leader, indicates their level of intolerance (*The Assam Tribune* August 23, 2000).

In Karbi Anglong the militants belonging to United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) are following the footsteps of the Bodo militants. These Karbi militants killed several people belonging to the Nepali and Bihari communities in the name of protecting the Karbi people from domination of the outsiders (*The Telegraph* May 24, 2000). Most Nepalis living in Karbi Anglong are descendents of soldiers who fought in World War II. A majority of them are farmers. A few of them are in government service. The Nepali people settled in the region avoid confronting other communities. They have always lent support to the stand taken by various students' unions, and maintained good relations with Bodo and Karbi militants. But that did not stop the militants from killing the innocent Nepalese. Like their Bodo counterparts, the Karbi militants have also served quit notices in the district recently to the Muslims, Bodos, Nepalis, Kukis and migrants from Bihar who settled in the district after 1955.

Compared to Bodo and Karbi extremists, by and large, the ULFA militants have remained selective in their target. During the initial years of their rise, ULFA fought against the corrupt officials and undertook certain developmental programs for the welfare of the poor. The ULFA militants destroyed oil pipelines, as also road and rail bridges. They killed many

armed officials, SULFA militants and also politicians like Nagen Sharma for their alleged anti-people and corrupt activities. Although ULFA's roots are in Assamese chauvinism, apparently they avoided raising chauvinist slogans and talked as if by Assamese they meant all the people living in Assam. Initially many Assamese people supported the ULFA leaders and cadre for their honesty and sincerity, although they were never carried away by ULFA's slogan of Swadhin Asom. However, the people began to disassociate from ULFA after the killing of Sanjoy Ghosh, a humanist who was involved in developmental projects in Majuli Island (*The Indian Express* August 8, 1997). The recent killing of 150 Biharis and Marwaris in different parts of Assam has also lowered the reputation of ULFA in the eyes of the common people. The Marwaris had migrated and settled in Assam long before independence. They have considerable stake in trade and business in Assam. Their pre-eminent position in Assam's economy was no doubt a subject of discussion in academic and political circles earlier also, but it was for the first time that the community was subjected to systematic attacks by the militants.

Compared to the Marwaris, who are financially well off, the Biharis are economically repressed and sequestered in the scattered pockets outlying the oil and tea towns in Upper Assam. They work as cheap labor in the ONGC's oil fields, tea estates and at construction sites. They constitute the menial workforce and cater to the domestic needs by supplying milk and allied products. The Biharis do not pose any threat to the indigenous people. They are no foreigners either. Yet they have become targets of the militants, who think that they can send a political message to the NDA government at the centre through such merciless killing. ULFA was in favor of the Presidents' rule in Assam (Bhowmik 2000). By killing Hindi speaking people, who are perceived to be the supporters of BJP, ULFA sought to provoke the NDA government to impose Presidential rule in Assam. Although ULFA now denies its hand in the killings, from the processions and appeals of

different organizations like *Assam Jatiyawadi Yuva Chatra Parishad* (AJYCP), AASU and *Manab Adhikari Sangram Samithi* (MASS), it becomes apparent that ULFA has instigated these killings to settle their scores with the AGP government. Whatever might be the lofty goals for which they fight, do the militants have the right to stake the lives of innocent people in their political games?

Violations of Rights of Minorities and Refugees

Another important issue that needs to attract the attention of the human rights activists is the question of the minorities and refugees in Assam. Although the political significance of the minorities and refugees did attract considerable attention of many scholars, their problems are not looked at from a humanitarian angle. Following the partition lakhs of Hindu refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan came and settled in Assam during the 50's and 60's. It is possible that through the porous borders some East Pakistani Muslims also sneaked into the Indian territory. The Indian State could have taken measures long back to fence the entire border and stopped the entry of the foreign nationals into Assam right at the border. Instead of securing such a permanent arrangement, which could have put an end to all suspicions and fears once and for all, demands for evicting the Pakistani or Bangladeshi nationals were raised from time to time in Assam since the Sino-Indian war of 1962. Several thousands of suspected Pakistani nationals were deported in the 1960's. Between 1961-67, the Assam police deported 56,917 'infiltrators' from Nagaon district alone. Hiteshwar Saikia admitted that during the period 1961-67, about 2 lakh Muslims were deported from Assam to East Pakistan. (Hussain, 2000).

As it is very difficult to distinguish between the Bengali Muslims who settled in Assam long before the partition and the Pakistani/ Bangladeshi nationals who entered after independence, at times many genuine Indian nationals were also branded as foreign nationals and harassed. The growth of

the population of Muslims and the increase in the number of representatives from the minority communities in the Assembly and Parliament created suspicion in the minds of the Assamese people about the large scale influx of Bangladeshi nationals into Assam. The fear of extinction of the Assamese language and culture and of the Assamese becoming a minority in their own land led to the Assam agitation in the early eighties. Although the leaders of the Assam agitation projected the Bangladeshi nationals as their target, it became clear from the Nellie massacre in 1983, where over 1,200 Neo-Assamese Muslims, mostly the women and children, were butchered, that the agitators were intolerant even of those Bengalis who had settled in the state before the partition of the country. The attacks on Muslims during the Assam agitation made the Neo-Assamese Muslims suspect that they would be made targets in the name of fighting the foreign nationals. It was to alleviate their genuine fears that the Illegal Migrants' (Determination by Tribunals) Act (IMDT Act) was enacted.

According to the IMDT Act, any Indian citizen living within the prescribed jurisdiction of habitation of a suspected foreigner could lodge a complaint with the concerned police station as to the foreigners' presence in the area. The police are also empowered to detect such a suspect on their own through a well-knit set up headed by an IGP (Border). However, for the final trial of a person, the power is vested with the judiciary, not the executive. The police can file a prima facie case against a suspected foreigner in the concerned Illegal Migrant Detection Tribunal and the Tribunal issues notice to such accused to appear in the court with proof of Indian citizenship. If the accused ignores the notice, the case may be decided *ex parte*. The act gives little advantage to an accused, excepting that he has a fair chance to defend himself in a judicial court, provided that he has the means to do so. In fact many poor daily wage earners of erstwhile East Pakistan have received such notices from the court. They have been forced to spend the entire savings of their life to afford the travel and legal expenses connected with the trial that may linger on for years. Many

poor people have surrendered to the influential political stooges who they thought would defend them in exchange of political support.

So far only 9,625 persons were declared as illegal migrants against a total of 3,02,554 enquiries initiated by the authorities during the last ten years or so (*The Indian Express* September 9, 2000). While the Muslim leaders point to this to show that the allegations of millions of foreigners staying illegally in Assam are unfounded, AASU and other Assamese sections who believe that millions of Bangladeshi nationals have stayed back cite this to argue that IMDT Act has failed to detect the foreign nationals. Much against the spirit of the Assam Accord, they have now started arguing for scrapping IMDT Act and making the 1951 National Register of Citizens, the base document for identifying the nationals. It is true that the procedures of IMDT Act are lengthy and time consuming. But the principles of natural justice demand / entail that a person be given a chance to argue his case, before he is branded and deported as foreign national. There is nothing wrong in expecting that those who charge people as foreigners should take the responsibility of proving the allegations. The Foreigners Act of 1946 denies these principles of natural justice and empowers the executive to evict the persons suspected to be foreign nationals, without any judicial intervention. This Act could be used judiciously, provided the executive is really impartial and unbiased.

But given the nature of the state police in Assam, we cannot be sure that the genuine citizens of Assam would not be harassed, if IMDT Act is repealed. Many irrational arguments advanced against IMDT Act also give rise to such fears. The argument that the population of Muslims in the state is growing at an alarming rate is falsified by the fact that the percentage of Muslims increased from 24.68 per cent in 1951 to 28.42 per cent in 1991 (Zarir Hussain 2000). During the period 1971 - 1991, compared to the Muslim population, the population of the STs increased at a much faster rate. If the

growth of Muslim population is attributed to the influx, how does one account for the growth of ST population in the state? The Muslims becoming a majority in three or four districts in Assam is usually cited to argue that there has been a continuous influx of Bangladeshis into Assam. However, so far there are no authentic studies to prove that the increase in Muslim population is only due to influx and not due to natural growth.

The rate of growth of population in states like Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, which do not suffer from a refugee problem, is also as high as in Assam (*The Times of India* January 7, 1997). There is considerable evidence to show that thousands of poor Bengali Muslims living in the border districts of Goalpara and Dhubri have migrated to Guwahati and other places in Upper Assam in search of jobs. Such internal migrants within the state are also branded knowingly or unknowingly as Bangladeshis. As such, correlation between the high rate of growth of the Muslim population and the presence of refugees in Assam is only hypothetical and not scientific. The Census 2001 report, which indicated that the rate of growth of population between 1991-2001 was less than the national average, would take much heat out of the controversy over foreign immigrants into Assam.

This is not to argue that there are no Bangladeshi nationals in Assam. Because of overpopulation and extreme poverty, many poor Bangladeshi citizens do come to Assam in search of livelihood. Mostly they work as maidservants, agricultural laborers, rickshaw pullers and woodcutters. They know that India is not their country and live under constant fear of detection and deportation. Many 'natives' take advantage of their insecurity and employ them by paying them less than what the native laborers would demand. It is a pity that these people whose labor is continuously exploited by both the urban and rural elites are projected as a threat to the survival of the native people and are being eliminated physically by different militant groups active in the state. Of course nobody is asking Assam to open its doors for immigration of foreign nationals.

The only point that one would like to raise is whether we can disregard the refugees' rights altogether, while defending the rights of the people claiming to be indigenous.

Conclusion

One can neither understand the causes nor find the remedy for human rights violations or abuses taking place in Assam without comprehending the nature of civil society.

Historically, Assam inherited a fragmented society divided into different national, ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Because of the wrong policies of the state and central governments, the region remained economically backward and underdeveloped. For different historical reasons, a strong bourgeois class, having its base in industry and business, could not develop in Assam. As a result, pre-capitalist socio-economic structures and corresponding ideological institutions and values persisted. The fear of continuous immigration of outsiders into Assam in the conditions of scarcity and economic underdevelopment has generated competition and rivalries among different ethnic groups for control over limited resources and opportunities. The Assamese middle class elite, which could secure political power at the state level, has failed to reconcile these competing interests. Instead of making efforts to build up a civil society uniting different national and ethnic groups in the state, overcome by the fear of the domination by the Bengalis, and now the Bangladeshis, the Assamese leaders took recourse to identity politics. But their chauvinistic slogans only helped in further weakening the already weak civil society, by encouraging competing ethnic identities in the state. Because of these reasons, despite being tied to the territory for decades, the communities have failed to develop their identity as citizens of Assam. The growth of militancy has foreclosed the possibilities of a meaningful dialogue among the competing ethnic communities. Once they came under the influence of the identity politics of the militants, the ethnic communities have started fighting among themselves, rather than fighting

against the system that generated the conditions for social conflicts. The continuing ethnic rivalries and prejudices among the people come as a blessing in disguise both for the Indian State that seeks to preserve the status quo and for the militants, who seek to promote narrow sectional interests. In the absence of unity and understanding among the people, each community thinks about the violation of human rights only when it affects them and ignores it when it happens to other communities. The associations formed to uphold the rights of particular groups of people do not hesitate to perpetrate violence against the people of other communities and thus violating their right to live in peace and with dignity. Each community tends to consider its rights as absolute, whereas those of others are considered expendable. Obsession with one's own problems and goals blurs the people's vision to see things beyond their narrow community boundaries. Consequently, the Assamese claiming to be fighting for defending the rights of the indigenous people ignore that they themselves were migrants in this land some time ago.

ULFA, which insists on the right to self-determination of the Assamese people, does not ponder for a moment whether there would be Assam at all, if the Bodos, the Karbis and the Bengalis were also to demand the right. The Bengalis in the Barak valley, who are almost hysterical about their linguistic rights and use every possible opportunity to attack the Assam government for attempting to impose the Assamese language, do not consider it their obligation to condemn the atrocities perpetrated against the innocent people in the Brahmaputra valley by the military and paramilitary forces. The Muslim organizations that claim to be fighting for defending the rights of the minorities overlook the consequences of continuous immigration of foreign nationals into Assam. Contrarily, those who argue that the indigenous population is becoming a minority in their own land exaggerate the dangers of influx of Bangladeshis and prescribe solutions that affect even those people who had settled in the state long before independence.

The disunity perpetuated by ethnic conflicts and identity politics, thus becomes a hurdle in giving shape to a 'viable civil society'. In the absence of tolerance and mutual trust, communication channels essential for civil society will be jeopardized. Both the Indian State and the militant groups take advantage of this weakness to play one community against the other and prevent the possibilities of building up a common front in defense of human rights. Once guns take the place of dialogue and narrow identities come to destroy the human reason, the civil society finds itself powerless to stop the violation of human rights. It is only when the people realize the need to look beyond their community identities and learn to appreciate and accept the fact that Assam is a multi-national, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic society, and build up a civil society wherein each group living in the region, conscious of its interests, also becomes aware of the needs of the others, and all the oppressed people living in the state participate in common struggles for the development of the region as a whole, there will not be an end to the violation of human rights in Assam.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

We regret to inform that Mr. Mangesh Kulkarni and Mr. Jatin Wagle have resigned from their editorial positions "due to other pressing commitments".

We are indeed thankful to them for their contributions to *New Quest* during the period of their association with the journal.

- EDITOR