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THE GUWAHATI DECLARATION AND THE ROAD TO PEACE IN ASSAM

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Imdad Hussain

Assam, the only State in the North-eastern region with vast natural and human resources and so with great potential in growth, is today far behind most other States in agriculture and industry, in infrastructure and connectivity, in higher education, especially in science and technology, and in that vital area of employment generation. And yet the State's growth rate at the time of independence was, in spite of her neglect under British rule, was much higher than the national average.

What went wrong, and what is the way out? These are questions that are being increasingly asked by the people. One answer is that if Assam is to catch up with the other States, attract investment, promote tourism and develop to its fullest potential there has first to be an end to the violence. In early 2001, therefore, the North Eastern Regional Centre of the Indian Council of Social Science Research decided to bring together in a Seminar scholars, administrators, the media, the notary public and concerned individuals to explore the possibilities of peace in Assam. This book is the outcome of the Seminar on *Peace in Assam: Prospects and Possibilities* held on 29th and 30th August 2001 at Guwahati and it calls for a wider readership cutting across the activist, policy makers as well as academia.

Imdad Hussain is a senior professor of History in the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. He was Honorary Director of the North Eastern Regional Centre of the ICSSR when the seminar was held.

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Preface

In the past decade or so the political violence and the ongoing insurgencies in India's troubled north-east has spawned a large number of publications, both scholarly and popular. The literature on Assam is itself fairly substantial and indeed, continues to grow. The focus of much of these, however, has been on the historical background or Assam's colonial legacy, or on social, economic and ethnic issues. Of late there has been, and for good reasons, a growing concern about the effects of the continuing unsettled political environment on her development process. Assam, the only State in the region with vast natural and human resources and so with great potential in growth, is today far behind most other States in agriculture and industry, in infrastructure and connectivity, in higher education, especially in science and technology, and in that vital area of employment generation. And yet the State's growth rate at the time of independence was, in spite of her neglect under British rule, was much higher than the national average.

What went wrong, and what is the way out? These are questions that are being increasingly asked by the people. One answer is that if Assam is to catch up with the other States, attract investment, promote tourism and develop to its fullest potential there has first to be an end to the violence. In early 2001, therefore, the North Eastern Regional Centre of the Indian Council of Social Science Research decided to bring together in a seminar scholars, administrators, the media, the notary public and concerned individuals to explore the possibilities of peace in Assam. The seminar was held in Guwahati during 29-30 August, and the outcome was the Guwahati Declaration. The views expressed in the papers read and in the discussions that followed each are now presented to the public in this slender volume. Editorial interventions have been kept to the minimum, if only to retain, as it were, the "flavour" of the original.

There has been regrettably, a considerable gap between the holding of the seminar and the publication of its proceedings. A

myriad details had to be attended to in the interim. The Editor's preoccupation with his academic work no less contributed to this delay. Still, the message of the seminar is as relevant today as it was three years ago. If peace has so far proved elusive the insights provided in the contributions deserves a closer consideration.

The seminar could not have been possible but for the enthusiastic support it received from individuals, organizations and the Government of Assam. The Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi and his youthful Minister of State for Home, Pradyut Bardoloi, who had just assumed office and were anxious to usher in an era of peace and prosperity to the beleaguered State, were supportive throughout. So too was Professor Mrinal Miri, Vice Chancellor, North Eastern Hill University and Chairman of the Regional Centre. We are very grateful to them. We are also grateful to all those who participated and presented papers at the seminar and became signatories in the Guwahati Declaration. Our thanks are also due to Jaideep Saikia who coordinated the seminar in Guwahati, and to Dr. Joshua Thomas, now Acting Director of the Regional Centre, who did much of the initial planning and saw to the publication of the proceedings. Finally, we thank Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, for bringing out the volume in good time and in excellent production quality.

Imdad Hussain

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Introduction

"Peace in Assam" as a seminar problem did not have a well defined theme, it was meant only to focus attention to the urgency of bringing normalcy to a state that had become, in the words of a former governor, "synonymous in the popular mind with violence and militancy". Nevertheless what has emerged from the presentations, both written and oral, and the discussions that followed each constitute an attempt to understand the phenomenon of conflict and violence as a first desirable step in the direction of resolution.

It is now generally acknowledged that the ongoing insurgency in Assam took roots in the nineteen eighties when the popular movement against the illegal presence of foreign nationals in the state was at its peak. The four preceding decades were of course not entirely years of peace. As early as in 1950-51 there was an armed uprising led by the Revolutionary Communist Party in Upper Assam. This was quickly crushed by the Assam Police Battalion and units of the Assam Rifles, and the exploits of Khagen Borbor and "sten" Barua, two leaders who had caught the imagination of the people at the time, is now a forgotten chapter in Assam's post colonial history. There had been several instances of communal violence, such as in Cachar immediately after partition, or in Goalpara at the time of the visit to Assam of the States Reorganisation Commission. In 1960 Assam experienced widespread disturbances over the issue of the official language of the State. Even as late as in 1969-70 there had been riots and non-Assamese speaking communities in a few towns in Upper Assam had become the victims of mob violence. All these were, however, relatively localised and unconnected affairs and easily contained by the state armed police. The events that followed the anti-foreigner agitation on the other hand were far more extensive and the militant organisations behind them were better organised, more lethally armed and led by ideologically motivated young men. The consequences of militancy

to the state and its development process, both economic and human, has proved more far reaching than anyone could have then anticipated.

The Anti-Foreigner Movement

As a prologue to the collections in this volume the anti-foreigner movement and Assam's slide into militancy, already the subject of considerable writing and innumerable academic discussions, is briefly told.¹ It all started with a protest rally held in Guwahati on 6 November 1979 by the All Assam Students Union (AASU), the apex organisation of all student bodies in the state. The AASU had been voicing concern since 1973 over the inclusion of non-Indian citizens in Assam's electoral rolls. But it was during the bye-elections to the Mangaldoi Parliamentary Constituency after the death of its member in April 1979 that exposed the magnitude of the problem. When the rolls were revised it was reportedly discovered that 45,000 voters, or one-sixth of the total electorate, were not citizens of India. That inclusion of such foreigners in the list of voters in other constituencies, both parliamentary and state assembly, could not be ruled out soon led to public outcry.

The result was the emergence of the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AGSP) or the umbrella organisation of several local groups. The AGSP began to work in tandem with the AASU in spearheading a movement demanding not only the deletion of the names of foreigners from the electoral rolls but also of their deportation from India. Their mass mobilisation of the people and other methods of protest took various forms, some remarkably novel, and were by and large peaceful and orderly. Nonetheless, violent incidents did take place such as the killing in Duliajan of an official of the Oil India Limited in July 1980. These were considered as by products of the movement.

1. There was considerable variation in terminology and terms such as insurgency, militancy and extremism were freely and interchangeably used in the discussions at the Seminar. Terrorism was less frequently used. No attempt has been made to impose any uniformity in the papers in this volume.

The foreign nationals whom the AASU wanted to disenfranchise and deport were landless Muslim peasants who had illegally entered the state after independence from the erstwhile East Pakistan, or more particularly after 1971 when Bangladesh came into existence. Included among the foreigners were those from Nepal. In their memorandum of 2 February 1980 to the Prime Minister the AASU had set this out clearly:

The problem which is agitating the minds of people of the entire North East Region is a problem of influx of foreigners from neighbouring countries particularly Bangladesh and Nepal. The influx of foreign nationals into Assam is not a recent phenomenon. The problem exists from the days of Independence. The problem has become so alarming that the very existence of the indigenous populations is threatened. But we are determined to preserve our identity, our history, our culture and our heritage in our strive to maintain the ethnic beauty of the people of the North East Region.²

Popular feeling against those from Nepal was less strident and less sustained than that against the Bangladeshi nationals. As later events were to show neither Dispur nor New Delhi were able to appreciate how deeply ingrained was the feeling of the average Assamese against the large-scale settlement and continued migration of outsiders into the state. This is what H N Das calls "mindset", which developed as a consequence of the accumulated grievances under colonial rule.

From the start leaders of Assam's minority community opposed the movement, arguing that there were no illegal immigrants in the state. Hence the movement against foreigners could only be directed against the minority community, by which was meant of course the large numbers of immigrants from the East Bengal districts who had settled in Assam during colonial times or had come after independence. This stand was hardly surprising since the leadership of Assam's Muslim community had long passed into the hands of these long settled immigrants.

2. H K Barpujari, *North East India, Problems, Policies and Prospects*, Guwahati, 1998, Appendix B, 146-154.

Opposition to the movement came from expected quarters too. The state unit of the Indian National Congress, the Indira Gandhi faction commonly called the Congress-I, acutely aware that the immigrant population could be a decisive factor in several constituencies saw no reason to alienate them. In New Delhi Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was equally anxious to install a Congress-I ministry in Assam after the expiry of President's rule, earlier imposed on account of the escalating violence. In February 1983 elections to the state assembly was foisted upon a protesting people. With AASU and the AGSP keeping away from the polls, a section of the leaders already under detention, the result of the elections was predictable enough. On the 27th of that month a Congress - I ministry under Hiteshwar Saikia was sworn in.

The elections and its immediate aftermath resulted in the extensive disturbances which was to engulf the state for a considerable period of time. It began with the highly provocative speeches by political leaders who had displayed a lamentable lack of restraint. Emotions ran high and violent incidents were triggered off in Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon districts, culminating in the infamous massacre at Nellie on 18 February. The form these disturbances took is thus described by Assam's highly regarded historian, the late Professor H K Barpujari:

The victims were all sections of the population (and) not confined to a particular section religious, ethnic or linguistic. In some places Assamese were the attackers and the victims both Hindus and Muslims. While in other places immigrant Muslims were the attackers and Assamese (the victims). In several places clashes took place between the various sections of the Assamese themselves. In few places Muslims joined hands with other in attacking their co-religionists. The redeeming feature was that the Assamese Muslims stood solidly behind their Hindu brethren setting an excellent example of inter-communal amity, harmony and solidarity'.³

"We just don't know why it precipitated the crisis by going to the polls without solving the foreigner issue" remarked Jaswant

3. *Ibid.*, 65.

Singh, BJP member of Parliament on the government's ill advised policy.⁴ The new Chief Minister, however, claimed to have "controlled the situation". But the legitimacy of his ministry remained questioned and his actions suspect. What the AASU leadership had to say about the Illegal Migration (Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983, the most controversial product of the period, reflects the popular perception:

Tribunals have been formed to legitimise and confirm the foreigners stay in India and not to deport them. We are well aware most of the foreigners live in Char areas. It will be impossible for anyone within 3 Kms of these to complain.⁵

To continue with the broad contours of the political developments in the state, the Hiteshwar Saikia ministry came to an end in 1985 after the "Accord" was signed in New Delhi on 15 August by the AASU and the Government of India. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) which the AASU leaders create formed the Government following the next elections, only to be dismissed in November 1990, months before their term was completed. What happened in between set the ground for the militancy that was soon to dominate Assam.

Militancy and Militant Organisations

It should not surprise anyone with a fair knowledge of Assam and its recent history that the AGP ministry should fail to find a solution to the core issue of foreign nationals. The problem was exceedingly complex, opinions even among scholars on its magnitude too divergent and the interests of the various ethnic, religious and political constituents too conflicting to admit of any easy solution. In all this the attitude of the Central Government operating within the narrow confines of party consideration was anything but helpful. The AGP's inexperience of government was compounded, it was said, by corruption and bickering in its top flight. What actually sealed its fate was the ascendancy of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the 'ambivalent' relations between the two.

4. Reported in *India Today*, 15 February 1983.

5. Shekar Gupta, *India Today*, 29 February 1983.

After April 1979 when it was established in Sibsagar the ULFA had been responsible for several acts of terrorist violence. By the closing months of the eighties it had become a power to be reckoned with in the Brahmaputra valley, enjoying a reputation as a ruthless outfit and at the same time a benevolent image of a modern Robin Hood.⁶

It would perhaps be rather simplistic to attribute the rise of the ULFA solely to the AGP government and its failure to realise the people's expectations. "In reality" says Professor Barpujari in his study quoted above, "it was an expression of opposition to the more than hundred years of exploitation by the colonial rulers and Indian Government".⁷ A former governor of the state, Lieutenant General (Retd.) S K Sinha has surprisingly much the same to say. As he told a seminar in New Delhi.

There is no denying the fact that insurgency erupted in Assam and that the people were carried away by the secessionist propaganda. On analysis, I find this happened largely because of a feeling of popular neglect and discrimination and not

6. A popular journal could thus write approvingly of its activities as late as in 1990: "There are no longer illicit liquor business, no prostitution and no trace of drug trafficking. For this the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) an underground organisation which is busy in conducting operation to clean society are responsible.

"So far they have killed 50 people from all over the states (sic). The people were regarded as anti-social elements and linked with various illicit businesses from drugs to supply of women. It is notable that in almost all the killings the ULFA claimed responsibility and issued a press release stating the reasons leading to the murder.

"Using fully automatic gear the ULFA are bang on target. They are also swift. The other day the ULFA gave a press release to the newsroom in which they described Ram Prakash Tiwari as an anti-social element and sentenced him to death. A few minutes later a telephone call from the Police said that "Ram Prakash Tiwari had been shot dead in his house by the ULFA". Mrinal Talukdar from Dibrugarh and Jorhat, *North East Sun*, xiii, 28, 10 February 1990. For an account of the emergence of the ULFA, see Samir Kumar Das, *ULFA. United Liberation Front of Assam. A Political Analysis*, Delhi, 1994

7. Barpujari, *op cit*, 79.

because of ethnic, cultural or historical differences. This is the critical difference between the insurgency in Assam and the other insurgencies in (the hill) tribal areas.⁸

The opening paper in this collection, that by J B Bhattacharjee, places neglect at the door of the Central Government, primarily their failure to check infiltration and take up the issue of support to Assam's militants by certain unfriendly neighbouring countries. Successive state governments on their part "contributed to the disappointment and frustration of the youths who joined the ranks of the militants". His elemental argument is that Assam's colonial past, and the legacy of that past, begs a closer look before militancy or conflict can be addressed. Apurba Baruah uses the same historical framework to suggest that the roots of conflict can be intelligible "only if we understand the nature of *Asomiya* nationalism and its response to the aspirations of other communities inhabiting the state of Assam". Baruah's construction of nationality brings out the two dimensions of militancy that violence as a common method often tends to blur. One of course is the movement avowedly against the Union of India and aims at an independent and sovereign Assam; the other merely seeking greater local autonomy, or even a separate state, within ethnic boundaries. That the aspirations of the nationalities or communities, small or big, should not be construed as anti-national has been emphasised in the papers, that follow. A few words on recent developments will perhaps be in order.

That the anti-foreigner movement had itself unleashed forces beyond the capacity of the young men at the helm of state politics to handle cannot be gainsaid. The February 1980 AASU memorandum to the Prime Minister had drawn attention to the effects of the "silent invasion" upon the plains tribal population – that all the 33 blocks and belts reserved for them were on the verge of extinction, forest resources were fast disappearing owing to indiscriminate felling of trees, and the occupation by foreign nationals of their lands:

8. S K Sinha "Violence and Hope in India's North East". In K P S Gill and Ajai Sahni, *Fault-lines. Writings on conflict and resolution*, 10, New Delhi, 2002, 1-21.

The very identity of the tribal population is in danger of extinction. The recent history of Tripura provides a good example to substantiate our belief. People of Assam cannot afford to ignore the warnings.⁹

The camaraderie between the AGP and the tribals proved shortlived. The AGP's construction of the Assamese identity, or nationality as several contributors call it, contained the seeds of alienation. The new language policy making the knowledge of Assamese mandatory for service under the government marked the beginning of the parting of ways with the Boros. What the latter told the Prime Minister in 1987 shows how quickly this alienation turned to hostility: "the present leaders of Assam make no secret their determination to wipe out the distinct language, culture and tradition." Assam's youthful leadership certainly proved inept and failed to gauge the Boro mind. But their inability to assuage the feelings of the Boro leadership was further aggravated by the Central governments attempts to use the Boros to destabilise the AGP Government.¹⁰

Hiteshwar Saikia's second ministry which took office in 1991 could bring no permanent solution to the Boro problem. The Accord of February 1993 which conceded to them their own autonomous area, was followed within three years by violence in the Boro dominated areas. The Boro Security Force became particularly restive from May 1996 when they began to target the *adivasis* in an effort to make the Boroland Autonomous Council area ethnically more homogenous. The Boros were unfortunately divided and this continued division of their organisation into several factions was helpful neither to the Government nor to the Boros themselves. The attempt of the Boro Security Force, which had now metamorphosed into the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB), to bring some unity among the different groups met with little success. Indeed, that very year NDFB found itself pitted against another rival formation, the Boro Liberation Tiger Force.

9. *Supra*, n 1,

10. See Ferzand Ahmed, "Assam: A Bloody Price," *India Today*, 15 September, 1989 and M S Prabhakar, "A Clandestine Outfit", *Frontline*, quoted in Barpujari, *op cit*, 78

In Karbi Anglong the situation rapidly changed when the Karbi National Volunteers, formed in March 1995, began their so called liberation struggle. At the same time in the adjoining North Cachar Hills demands for a separate state began to gain ground after the Dima Haram Dauga (DHD) was formed. The floodgate to such extreme demands which was opened by the Reorganisation of North-East India in 1972 was to get a further fillip by the unsolicited offer of local autonomy to every ethnic group by the Hiteswar Saikia Government. Two papers deal with issues connected with these developments.

Unlike Baruah who clearly recognises the separate identity of the various small nationalities, Hemanta Barman sees them as constituents of a larger Assamese society. He explains their demands over the last two decades for recognition as a distinct ethnic group, the term he uses rather than smaller nationalities which Baruah and others use, as a reaction to their "suppression" by the Assamese middle class. Gurudas Das draws attention to the consequences of the attempts of the Assamese to turn poly-ethnic Assam into a homogenised "nation-province". More than the failure of that attempt was the alarm it caused to the different ethnic or tribal groups which he feels is responsible for the conflict situation in Assam. Das sounds a note of caution that if efforts by the Assamese in this direction continues it would be at the cost of Assam's territorial integrity.

As Assam stepped into the new century peace seemed as remote as it ever was. Hiteswar Saikia's much trumpeted surrenders of ULFA cadres introduced a new element in the disruption of the economic and political fabric of the state. These surrendered ULFA, or SULFA as they came to be known, whose past the Government chose to ignore and who were given loans on easy terms as part of their rehabilitation programme turned into Assam's mafia.¹¹

Civil Society

The "militarisation" of the state had received considerable attention at the seminar if only because of its implications on civil

11. See for example, Ajai Sahni and Bibhu Prasad Routray, "SULFA: Terror by Another Name" in KPS Gill and Ajai Sahni, *Faultlines*, 9, 1 - 38

society. ULFA's activities in the first years of the Accord, now well documented, from the series of kidnappings or killings of government officials, businessmen and individuals to massive extortion from traders and business concerns, particularly the tea companies, reached such proportions that the organisation was banned in November 1990 and operations were handed over to the army. Operation Bajrang, and Operation Rhino which followed in September 1991, were not without success. It had the effect of breaking the ULFA into two. The hard core leaders who refused to abandon their demands for "Swadhin" or independent Assam found sanctuaries outside India's borders. While those who surrendered were rehabilitated but the failure of the political leadership to follow up the successful operations undid much of the work of the army.

The continued violence led the Government of India to create the Unified Command for combined army and police operations under the GOC 4 Corps. Civilian supremacy over the command was theoretically maintained, to overcome Assam's objections, by conceding its presiding functions to the state Chief Secretary as its Chairman. How the military viewed insurgency can be seen from the assessment of the command's achievements by the Governor, Lieutenant General Sinha:

We could not have the kind of unity of command that General Sir Gerald Templer established in Malaya, but the Unified Command was the closest we could achieve and it worked. There were hiccups, but these were resolved. The result was that *we were able to kill more than a thousand militants in encounters*, we recovered three thousand weapons and a large amount of cash, and over three thousand three hundred militants surrendered in batches. (*emphasis added*)¹²

12. S K Sinha *op cit*, 18. For General Sinha's views on unified commands, see "Counter Insurgency Operations" (written in 1970) in his *Of Matters Military*, New Delhi 1980, 162 - 177, in which he writes, "When insurgency erupts the Government must inevitably use its army to combat it. Democratic Governments are generally haunted by the fear of the ghost of Oliver Cromwell stalking in the portals of power. There is, therefore, an understandable hesitation to hand over the problem to the Army. Apart from this, it is obvious that the Army by itself cannot deal with Insurgency and it will be

(*contd.*)

Such notions of the objective or methods of counter-insurgency operations seem to be held by lower formations of the army. In February 1998, for instance, army sources reported and was duly broadcast by the Guwahati Doordarshan on the 14th that a “major breakthrough” had been achieved in Tamulpur where a district commander of the BLTF was shot dead. It was added that the army patrol found the BLTF group resting in a hut, and killed three while they were sleeping and had no chance to retaliate!¹³

Assam’s past history in this connection is worth recalling. It used to be the proud claim of every head of police not very long ago, that of all provinces in India Assam enjoyed an enviably low crime rate and the people were among the most peaceful. One head of administration in the late nineteenth century even declined to have anything more than an armed civil police for the internal security of the province: “there is no reason why with a gentle and peaceful population like the Assamese a more warlike instrument should be

(contd. . . .)

wrong to advocate the supervision of the civil government. Imposition of martial law may be tried as a temporary expedient in a specific area but in the long run it is unlikely to liquidate insurgency. At the end of the scale is the mistake notion that the Army should conduct counter insurgency operations as aid to the civil power. The technique of dispersal of unlawful assemblies with minimum force cannot be adopted to warfare of this type. The solution in this regard lies in the setting up of an integrated Civil and Army organisation at all levels to deal with the problem in a joint and co-ordinated manner. The Malayalam example provides a classic pattern for such an organisation.” For an account of the British campaign in Malaya, see Edgar O’ Balance, *Malaya: the Communist Insurgent War, 1948 – 60*, London, 1966.

13. English news from Guwahati Doordarshan, 7.00 p.m., Saturday 14 February 1998. Even political leaders refer to casualty in militant ranks to publicise success of counter-insurgency operations. Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta for instance told the press in January 2000 that since May 1996, 600 ultras were killed and 500 held. *The Shillong Times*, Monday 24 January 2000. *The Telegraph*, North East Supplement, Guwahati 21 May 2001, justifying the retention of army in Assam, reported: “How effective the Unified Command has been can be gauged from the fact that as many as 988 rebels had been killed between January 1997 and April 2001 as compared to 165 militants killed during Operation Bajrang and Rhino between 1990 and 1996”.

required", he had declared.¹⁴ The colonial army shared this view. The Commander-in-Chief Lord Kitchener's military reform and mobilisation scheme of 1905 - 06 did not envisage any permanent garrison east of Bengal. Rather, some years later the Assam Brigade was moved out of the province and until the Second World War Assam was no more than a sub-area of the Presidency Command. Where once three Indian infantry battalions sufficed to enforce *Pax Britannica* in Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, these is now spread over the region a staggering military presence far larger than the Allied build up during 1942-45 for the defence of Eastern India and the recovery of Burma.

It can be argued that Assam Police itself had undergone a process of militarisation. The old style policing revolving around the *thana*, the beat and inspections had given away to commando operations and "jungle warfare" as the more dominant police functions¹⁵. In April 1995 the Director General told reporters that Assam Police was raising its first "elite" commando battalion to be trained by the National Security Guard and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police to combat separatist guerrillas and other militants in the state.¹⁶ A

14. Note by Chief Commissioner, Charles Alfred Elliott, 20 January 1882, in Alexander MacKenzie, *A History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Benga*, Calcutta 1884, App F, 506

15. Interestingly, the Assam Rifles lost its unique character for policing frontier and tribal territories on account of its coming under the operational command of the military and working alongside Indian army formations in the Second World War. The Assam Governor's Advisor for Tribal Affairs James Phillip Mills was perceptive enough to notice this in a report in 1944: "The Assam Rifles performed their most adequately. But it is impossible to resist the feeling that the militarisation of the force, inevitable though it is at the present time, does not increase its suitability for the duties it has to perform on the North East Frontier. The Assam Rifles Manual does not visualise a force indistinguishable from a unit of the Indian army". *A Brief General Report on the North East Frontier Agency for the period 23 October 1943 to 30 June 1944*, India office Records, L/P&S/12/3114, Call 22/4; the British Library, London.

16. Reported in the *Asian Age*, Supplement, Eastern Age, 27 April 1995, also *North East Times*, Monday 22 May 1995 for interview with the Director General of Police, Assam; Comments in the *Meghalaya Guardian*. Wednesday 24 May 1995, See Editorial, "Can the Assam Police do it?"

“massive modernisation” drive was underway, the antiquated .303 rifles were being phased out, to be replaced eventually by AK 47 assault rifles. This was how he had explained the need to rearm his men: “The idea of bringing in sophisticated weaponry is that our police force should be able to match the firepower of the rebels.”¹⁷

The militarisation of the state has naturally adversely impacted upon the everyday life of the ordinary citizen. The elaborate personal security arrangements of the political leadership and sadly of even the bureaucracy including the police itself, has swallowed up the greater portion of the (then) 60,000 strong Assam Police. The commandoes raised and trained to fight militants have been diverted to what is commonly called VIP security. While politicians and public servants thus cocooned themselves in protective mesh the common citizen was left exposed to extortion and violence. Detection and prevention of crime or traffic control with which he is immediately concerned had become the first casualty. Social scientists have generally been voicing concern over the excessive use of force. Sanjib Baruah, for example, had noted three year’s earlier:

The State’s response to the ULFA has been more militarist than political. The Indian army and paramilitary forces have been employed to deal with the challenge, and in the process extreme authorisation methods have been introduced in the fabric of ordinary life, especially in those parts of Assam that are seen as ULFA strongholds.¹⁸

Not surprisingly therefore that this subject should occupy a prominent place in the Seminar discussions.

Sanjay Borbora’s paper presented on behalf of the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samity, provides the critique of militarisation. “The outcome of the process of militarisation can be put before discerning audiences”, he says, “as a history of using military power

17. *Ibid* None will dispute the need for technological parity, but this was a clear enough signal to the militants that Assam Police was no match against them so far as its training and arms were concerned.

18. Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, New Delhi 1999, 144.

to tackle political problems.” He finds no evidence of the State encouraging a “healthy debate” on its myriad problems, rather there is a propensity to use force much in the way the colonial state had earlier done. His view that “militarism is the primary factor that leads to the diminishing of social space for the resolution of people’s aspirations” is shared by several other contributors. Udayon Mishra, taking both State and militant actions together says in his opening statement: “One of the most significant fallouts of state and militant violence that has hit Assam for the past twenty years or so has been the growing marginalisation of the average citizen. Caught between the violence let loose by those who represent the state and those who wish to break it, civil society has been increasingly losing its voice and this, naturally, is a matter of grave concern”. The case for civil society “intervention”, Misra’s central theme, is taken up by Monirul Hussain, who argues the need to identify, *inter alia*, civil society as a major actor in the peace resolution process.¹⁹ An interesting dimension to this, the relevance of cultural space, is suggested by Sajal Nag. Its relative unimportance, even in normal circumstances, will be borne out by the position the concerned administrative department occupies in the hierarchy of government. What seems even more surprising is the virtual absence of any significant involvement of women in the peace process, in spite of Assam’s unique historical experience. This was Paula Banerjee’s submission: that in “any discourse on possibilities of peace it becomes essential to include women as participants”.

Economic Development

Assam’s neglect and discrimination against her by the Central Government, was forcefully expressed at the Guwahati seminar and this theme is spread over in several of the collections in this volume. Apurba Baruah likens Assam to that of an “internal colony”. Assam’s relative economic backwardness and the absence of any significant development over the past decades is generally acknowledged by all contributors. H. N. Das draws on data derived from surveys to

19. For persistence of these suggestions see Samir Kumar Das, “Ethnic Conflicts and Internal Security: a Plea for Reconstructing Civil Society in Assam”, in K P S Gill and Ajai Sahni, *Faultlines, op cit*, 37 ff.



Introduction

show that since 1993 poverty has been on the increase rather than on the decline and the economic growth has been much slower in Assam than in the rest of the country. This has been aggravated by the spurt in the growth of population, largely immigrant. Whether or not Assam's economic condition is due to the neglect by the Government of India is of course an issue that will continue to be a subject of considerable debate.²⁰

The concern of the seminar had been about the dangers of a stagnant economy, which R Gopalkrishnan points out can prove to be conducive for discontented elements within the society to revive the "dormant fissiparous tendencies and encourage the formation of an insurgent situation in the state". The most valuable part of Das' analysis particularly in regard to the seminar problem, was the interface between insurgency and development. Though he finds no direct link between the two, his conclusion remains unequivocal: "economic backwardness is one of the causes of the insurgency in Assam" and the "Assamese mindset (which) developed during the past two centuries has added fuel to it". His comments, coming from a distinguished civil servant and a former Chief Secretary to Government, on the "stumbling block" to development needs to be acted upon. R Gopalakrishnan on the other hand emphasises the importance of peace in economic development is to be achieved. For this he brings to notice advances in peace research. Like

20 See for example, Ajai Sahni and J. George, "Security and Development in India's North-East: An Alternative Perspective" in K.P.S.Gill and Ajai Sahni, *Faultlines. Writings on Conflict and Resolution*, Vol. 4, New Delhi, February 2000, 43-67. The two authors thus write, "The States of the North-East are ascribed 'Special Category' status by the Government of India, and the National Development Council (NDC), the apex body for the approval of Plan funding, earmarks 30 percent of that Plan allocations for Special Category States as Central assistance for State Plans. Significantly, these States receive 90 percent of Plan assistance for grant, and just 10 percent as loan, as against the norm of 30 percent grant and 70 percent loan for other States. Favoured Treatment is also given by the Finance Commission with respect to sharing Central tax revenues. Clearly, therefore, these States have not been made to suffer as a result of their resource endowments". For the so called underground economy Ajai Sahni "The Terrorist Economy in India's Northeast: Preliminary Explorations" in *Faultlines*, 8, 127-148.

H. N. Das and others he too points out the importance of civil society in the developmental process

The Seminar's concern for the economic development of the state was much deeper than the number of presentations on the subject would suggest. This was in fact underscored in the Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi's inaugural address that economic backwardness was the prime cause that bred insurgency in Assam, and "once the economy started striding upward, the problem of insurgency would automatically move to the back seat." This would seem rather simplistic, but state Home Minister Prodyut Bordoloi had said that interrogation of the surrendered militants revealed "that it was the economic causes that drove them to join in extremist forces rather than any attraction towards secessionist ideology".

Jaideep Saikia's somewhat personalised account of the problem in Assam and that by Mamang Dai drawing attention to what could happen to Arunachal Pradesh if on concern continues round off the collection.

The Guwahati Declaration

Each of the papers contain suggestions for restoring peace. These can be divided broadly into three: (i) the need for accelerated economic development of the state (ii) recognition of the rights and aspirations of smaller ethnic groups and ensuring a constant dialogue between them and the larger civil society, and (iii) the demilitarisation of the state. That all this can be achieved only if violence ends and a semblance of peace is restored to the State was recognised by the Seminar. At the conclusion of the deliberations the seminar agreed:

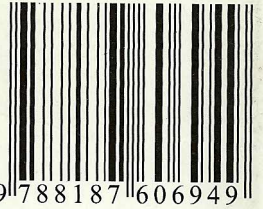
to adopt a resolution for peace in Assam and calls upon the Government of India and Assam, the ULFA and the NDFB to respect the wishes of the people of Assam and without further ado abjure all forms of violence and immediately come to the negotiating table . It also collectively calls upon the Government of India to take concrete steps to withdraw the India army from the state of Assam in order to usher in an atmosphere which will be conducive for dialogue with the various militant organisations.

It also calls upon the people of Assam to steadfastly support such an initiative and prevail upon the various parties to sit in dialogue and conclude the desirable cessation of hostilities by all concerned in order to prepare a conducive ground for a negotiated settlement.

The seminar therefore enjoined upon the rest of India to understand Assam's ailments – heir for over five decades – and collectively contribute their mite to the healing process. Indeed, it concluded, India cannot exist without Assam as certainly as Assam will not exist without India.²¹

21. Press Release issued by the ICSSR – NERC after due deliberation by the participants of the seminar on 30 August 2001.

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