

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Political Culture of Assam Some Reflections

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The present paper attempts to highlight the political culture of Assam that has emerged since independence. However, the study will not be complete if a simultaneous analysis is not made of the total political culture of the country. In fact the political cultural of Assam is largely the reflections of the country's total political culture.

The first part of the paper deals with the theoretical concept of political culture and the second part highlights the trends of Indian political culture with particular reference to Assam since independence.

I

The term *culture* is all pervasive. It permits, without our awareness, into every aspect of our daily living like the air we breathe. Kohler defines culture or *kulture* as "*the totality of human achievements in the conquest of the universe through knowledge, creative art and technical domination.*"¹

The concept of political culture is something of a paradox. Because one cannot successfully focus on a particular area of a group's total way of life without simultaneously focussing on other areas. Yet, the concept of political culture seems to limit to those patterns of behaviour and those orientations that are presumably characterized by only one aspect of group's existence that is political. However, the concept does not deny that a political culture is embedded in a large culture. Sidney Verba² recognizes that political culture is an integral aspect of more general culture. But at the same time he believes that the connection between general culture and political culture is not completely identical. Almond even tends to emphasize the autonomy of political culture.³

It is extremely difficult to define the term political culture. More than 164 definitions have been given by Kroeber and Kluckhohn.⁴ The term was first used by Gabriel Almond in 1956 in his important essay on "Comparative Po-

litical System". To him "every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientations to political actions". This pattern of orientations he labelled as the system's political culture. In a similar vein Lucian Pye has referred to the political culture as "the ordered subjective realism of politics". Sidney Verba defines political culture as consisting of "empirical beliefs, expressive symbols and values which define the situation in which political action takes, place".⁵ The pattern of political culture of Heinz Eulau can be inferred from the political behaviour of groups as well as the beliefs, guiding principles, purposes and values that individual in a group, whatever, its size, hold in common.⁶ Similarly to Kavanagh a political culture is composed of the attitudes, beliefs, emotions and values of society that relate to the political system and political issues.⁷ These attitudes may not be consciously held but may be implicit in an individual or group relationship within the political system. According to Dawson and Prewitt a nation's political culture includes political traditions and folk heroes, the spirit of public institutions, political passions of the citizens, goals articulated by political ideology and both formal and informal rules of the political game. It also includes other factors — such as political stereotypes, political style, political moods, the tone of political exchanges and finally some senses of what is appropriately political and what is not.⁸ It is thus political culture which gives meaning, predictability and form to the political process of a country and also provides structure and meaning to the political sphere. However, political culture changes from time to time and from country to country. Within a country also there may be a number of subcultures distributed over different geographical regions and among ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. Cultural differentiation also exists among various levels of government over a long period of history. Although there exist many hazards and limitations in its measurement, it provides important clues to people's orientation to political system. Political culture thus is an important tool for the understanding of political system in contemporary political analysis.

Here, the concept is used mainly in the context of political orientations of political parties and leadership.

II

The first years of India's Independence were years of high hopes, great challenges and considerable achievements. The Constitution cherished ideals of democracy, secularism and socialism. The country has succeeded in sustaining for long a democratic order through competitive elections. But disappointment soon came. Economic development, specially agricultural development, did not accelerate as rapidly as expected by the leadership. The most disap-

pointing was the political developments that emerged. In place of a growing sense of national unity, caste tribal, religious, and linguistic bodies multiplied. Gail Omvedt says that the core elements of Indian political culture have become idealism, caste, hierarchy, religiosity, guru worship and seclusion and subordination of women.⁹ Myron Weiner has characterized India as having two political cultures, each operating at a different level. The first is the emerging mass political culture and the second, an elite political culture. He believes that there may be a continuous process of urbanizing the rural culture which might ultimately lead to some kind of reconciliation between the two kinds of culture.¹⁰ But in reality, instead of reconciliation and the transformation of elite culture to a mass culture the system degenerates giving rise to negative resultant effects than positive outputs. The political parties have sacrificed all their ethical values. The two successors of Nehru, Shastri and Indira Gandhi witnessed the increasing fragmentations which resulted six years of (1963-69) conflict and factional intrigues in the party. The Congress has lost all its original appeal as the party for poor and downtrodden. A new culture, dominated by irrational and dark forces has emerged and threatened the national unity, economic development and political order. According to Raghuvir Singh in Indian polity there "is a corroding de-culturization of politics and a decline of tradition of civility. The rulers are wilfully clinging to power by hook or by crook; they say that they are riding a tiger and once they step down they will be devoured."

In the name of democracy, election has been reduced to a number game and vote bank culture has developed. The rule of majority turned into a rule by minority in the wake of mushroom growth of national, regional, communal and personalist political parties in India.¹² The great political ideals like liberty, equality and justice have been reduced to nothingness in our political system. The political parties have no ideology and programme of action. The public opinion is created and imposed on the people. The political parties have only one thing in common – the bankruptcy of ideas. It seems, in politics there is no friend and enemy but only permanent interests. For the satisfaction of selfist interests political parties have sacrificed all their moral. The latest Congress withdrawal of support twice to UF Government is a glaring example. Former Lok Sabha speaker R. Roy says that "leaders of various political parties have not been able to develop a culture of running coalition." Regretting the functioning of coalition government, C.P. Bhambri says that in the name of running coalition political parties are selling themselves. So at the national level a coalition culture has yet to develop. Instead, the whole political culture revolves round money and power. A new culture has developed – the power culture. Bertrand Russell says that power intoxicates and the wielders of power miscalculates¹³ which seems to have

relevance in Indian political culture. Rajni Kothari further added that "an extremely complicated structure is emerging in the country . . . the real wielders of powers have never been party politicians but bureaucrats."¹⁴

Corruption has become the order of the day. It has now reached a shocking and shameful height. Corruption more particularly among the guardians of the state, is the most striking feature. There is a steep decline in ethical standard, efficiency and integrity in administration and other areas of public activities. But the Government underscores the need for fighting against this great evil. Persons occupying top positions in power structure not only tolerate corruption but also encourage it. Nehru once declared in the Parliament that corruption was inevitable in a developing country. Later on, Indira Gandhi dismissed corruption as a world wide phenomenon. India is one of the countries in the corruption list of developing countries in the on going process of globalization to achieve market economy.

The bargaining culture on the basis of caste, religion and language has enhanced the defection politics and political instability. The large scale and frequent defections of the past two decades turned out to be disaster to the country.¹⁵ During the first active period of defection (1967-70), some legislators defected and redefected six or seven times before they finally settled down. It is said that in India some defectors preferred to have breakfast with one party, lunch with another, and dinner with a third party on the same day. Image building and worship of leaders have become more important than shouldering responsibilities and delivering goods to the society. The democratic process is not working and concepts like Constitutionalism, Socialism and Secularism have been reduced to the level of absurdity by the Government and the people. The growing centralization of power which is perhaps the British legacy has resulted in the growth of regional forces throughout the length and breadth of the country. Besides, professionalism in politics has developed to such an extent that politics became a family and dynastic rule for the installation of one's own dynasty. Not only Nehru family, Shuklas in Madhya Pradesh, Abdullahs in Jammu and Kashmir, Patnaiks in Orissa, Lals in Haryana, Prasads in Bihar, Apongs in Arunchal Pradesh are few cases to cite.

Moreover, Indian polity has been a scene of politically based acts of violence and both Indira Gandhi and Ravib Gandhi were the victims of such violence. Following Vohra Committee's Report, it was assumed that no political party would dare to field such elements in election. But in reality the nexus between politicians and criminals remains as thick as before. Added to all, the terrorists activities have shaken our political system and has given a new dimension to the politics of violence.¹⁶ The gap has widened in Indian polity between ruler and ruled.

Thus, beside casteism and religiosity, some emerging trends of Indian political culture comprises of political instability, politics of defection, emergence of regionalism, political violence, political corruption, professionalism in politics, criminalization in politics, end of ideology, etc.

The state of Assam has not only witnessed the reflections of greater Indian political culture but also the emergence of a sub-culture on the basis of language and ethnicity. In the first two decades of Independence (1950-70), politics was centred round the demands for a separate state for the hill districts, launched by the tribal people which culminated in the reorganization of states in 1971, on the basis of language and seven independent political units emerged out of greater Assam. Of course, Nagaland got the statehood in sixties. This is but natural due to the existence of various ethnic groups with distinct religion, language, culture and traditions. In fact, Assam represents a unique set of topographical, climatic, economic, socio-cultural conditions which differ vastly from the rest of the country. Even after reorganization of 1971 till today, ethnicity is the major concern of all regional political parties. More and more ethnic groups are emerging (Bodos, Karbis, Ahoms, Kacharis, Misings, Deories, Koch Rajbongshis, Morans, Muttaks, Chutias, Tiwas, etc.) and raising demands from autonomy to separate state. The mere existence of a number of ethnic groups does not necessarily imply conflict unless the situation is aggravated by dominant ethnic group to suppress other minor groups. In Assam, the conflict situation is aggravated to a certain extent by the dominant section of the Assamese society. The leadership of various ethnic communities, therefore, concentrating more for political rights to balance the political power of the state. Besides, continuous flow of refugees from Bangladesh and migration of people from the rest of country greatly affected the population composition of Assam and aggravated further the tensions of the society. Today, not only the people of Assam afraid of economic insecurity but also cultural and political insecurity in distant future. The Assam movement on foreign national issue was the reflection of such apprehensions. The political orientations of the student community largely centred round the implementation of Assam Accord in letter and spirit and preparation of a correct voter's list.¹⁷

A period of political instability has been witnessed by the state from 1978-82, which is the fall out of Janata Party at the centre. The state was ruled by the Congress since independence till 1977. There was political stability and the Congress did not face any serious threat to its existence. But new trends emerged after the Parliamentary Election of 1977 at the centre. Instability in the state began for the first time with the formation of Janata Ministry headed by Golap Borbor. In the centre, self-seeking issues, internal contradictions and inter-party rivalry led to the collapse of Janata Government in 1979. Fol-

lowing the patterns of development at the centre, in Assam also, the Janata Party was divided into three factions — the Janata, the Janata (S), the Assam Janata Dal (AJD). Borbora failed to hold the ministry from the system erosion. Interestingly AJD emerged within the Assembly and few independents formed another group known as Progressive Democratic Front (PDF).

A coalition government was formed in the state under the leadership of J. Hazarika with the participation and outside support of various political parties, to last only for three months. The ministry was suffering from the inherent weakness of a coalition. The Government was not based on any common programme. Again with the re-emergence of Indira Gandhi to power at the centre in January 1983, there was a large scale defection in the Congress(I) in the state which eventually enabled A. Taimur to form the Government on December 6, 1980. It is noteworthy that Congress(I) had originally 8 members in the Assembly (1978) but its strength, later on rose to 44, as a result of large scale defection of various political parties. Crisis started mostly because of the dissidents in the party which ultimately led to the resignation of Taimur Ministry and the state was put under President's Rule. Keshob Gogoi Ministry was the last and the shortest ministry which lasted for 65 days.¹⁸ Gogoi himself was an arch defector who served both the Janata party and the Assam Janata Dal before switching over to Congress(I). Thus, from March 1978 to March 1983, the state was governed by four Chief Ministers in the wake of chronic political instability largely due to politics of defection and intra party rivalry. All the four Government failed to solve the law and order situation and foreign national issue. Rather they tried to keep the issue alive and used it for their own advantage. However, the President's Rule came to an end with the turbulent election of 1983.

The 1983 Assembly election in Assam is a glaring example of political violence which has no parallel in history. A fear was haunting the Assamese community, fear of losing political power, as the election was declared on the basis of 1979 electoral roll. People of Assam boycotted the election forced upon them by the centre. In the face of the defective voter's list many political parties also boycotted the election. The pre-poll violence created a terror in the minds of the electorate. "The carnage began with a few deaths on February 2, during the next 3 weeks it rose everyday with dreadful ferocity, a dozen at Chamaria on the 12th, a hundred at Gohpur on the 14th, and then at least a thousand at Nellie on the 18th." According to Assam Government report, a total of 3049 persons were killed in violence in the state between January to June 1983. According to Amnesty International in the month of February alone an estimated 3,500 killings took place. All kinds of poll violence — killing and kidnapping of candidates and supporters, snatching of stengun even from policemen, gutting of government and private buildings of candidates

took place.¹⁹ Thus, 1983 election let loose a series of violence in state. However the election was conducted with the assistance of people outside the state, but the percentage of polling was below 3% in 10 assambly constituencies. The election was thus a mockery of democracy rather than an attempt at evaluating public opinion. The people of Assam never accepted the legitimacy of Saikia Government formed after the 1983 election. The political orientations of the people of Assam expressed in non-voting and non-participation. There seemed to be sharp differences of political orientations of Congress(I) leadership and the people. The foreign national issue culminated in Assam Accord on August 15, 1985 and regionalism emerged in the state.

The regionalism in Assam thus grew out of a reaction to solve its peculiar problems. Although, the Assam Accord has helped the Asom Gana Parishad to capture political power in 1985, the AGP leadership failed to implement the Accord. The party initially claimed to have a culture of its own, different from age old Congress culture. The people of Assam repositied great faith on AGP as the right party to satisfy aspirations of people. But now AGP leadership has been dubbed as betrayer. Former AGP Home Minister remarked that the party has no political culture even after twelve years of its existence except money and power. It follows the foot prints of Congress culture in all respects. The party sacrificed all moral principles and deviated from the original cause of furthering democratic regionalism. The party lost public support in 18 months of its second term which is reflected in its debacle in the last parliamentary election. Intra-party conflict has sharpened and many AGP members criticized the dictatorial style of functioning of the party leadership. In fact, a new party, backed by some senior members of AGP formed as Asom Jatiya Sanmilian.

The AGP is now crippled by corruption, intra-party rivalry and combating insurgency with unified command structure and plagued by growing unpopularity. Both late Chief Minister Saikia and present Chief Minister P.K. Mahanta are involved in LoC scam of more than Rs.200 crores. In the first term of AGP, Mahanta was awarded Mr. Clean in 1988 but within a decade he was charge sheeted while in office in LoC scam. UF Government was not keen to do justice to the case because of party image.²⁰ Moreover, professionalism in Assam politics has increased to such an extent that the sons, wives, widows and close relatives of political leaders have been inducted into politics irrespective of political parties. The Chief Ministers including S.C. Sinha, late H. Saikia and P.K. Mahanta are all involved in the game. However, Saikia's professionalism in politics has no parallel. His wife and son were holding key posts in politics during his regime and a dynastic rule has been established in the party. The political career of J. Mahanta, wife of present Chief Minister has already started. She was given the AGP ticket of Nagaon parliamentary seat against the protest of senior members of AGP denying the party ticket to

M. Saikia who returned from the same seat for three consecutive terms.²¹ These are few cases, where the guardians of the state are involved. But in reality more ministers, MPs and MLAs are involved in professionalism in politics. Further, along with increasing violence, criminalization of politics has also taken root in Assam. The money factor becomes so dominant that ideology has no role to play.

Thus, to conclude, in view of the growth of such political culture India instead of becoming strong has become weak and the society is plagued by poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment. The concept of Participatory Democracy, with a high level of illiteracy, instead of controlling governmental abuse of power, increasing societal complexity on many fronts. The necessary socio-economic conditions do not simply exist for effective functioning of democracy in the country. Therefore, the need of the hour, is to start afresh awareness movements in the countryside to develop a culture of its own so as to replace the existing political culture.

NOTES

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- 3 G.A. Almond, "Comparative political system", *Journal of Politics*, XVIII, 1956, p.396.
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- 5 Sidney Verba, "Comparative political culture", L. Pye and Sidney Verba (ed). *Political Culture and Political Development*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp.513-516; see also G.A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1963, Chapter I.
- 6 Heinz Eulau, *The Behavioural Persuasion in Politics*, op.cit., Chapter III, pp.63-68.
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