

**STRESS AND RESPONSE IN A SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS
IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY: A RESPONSE
PERCEPTION OF THE ASSAM GANA SANGRAM
PARISHAD (AGSP)**

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Introduction

The State of Assam is located in the North-Eastern Frontier of the Indian Union. It lies between 21°51' and 27°58' N Latitude and 89°49' and 97°26' E Longitude. It covers an area of 78,253 Km² and has a population of 19,897,000 (1981 estimates). It has an average density of 254 persons per Km². It is bound by Bhutan and Tibet (Ghina) in the north; on the north and north-east by Arunachal Pradesh; on the east and south-east by Nagaland and Manipur; on the south and south-west by Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura; on the west by the State of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Generally speaking, the acceptable interpretation of the term 'Assam' is its derivation from the anglicised version of 'Asom' - a name given to the valley by the Ahom rulers which they conquered in the thirteenth century.

In the thirteenth century, the state was conquered by the Ahoms belonging to the Tai family, further east. After about four centuries, the continuous pressure from the Burmese weakened the Ahom empire; so much so that the Ahom rulers had to seek the help of the British in India to dislodge the Burmese. Accordingly, the treaty of Yandaboo compelled the Burmese to relinquish their claim on the Ahom territory. By the same treaty, the entire area came under the British domain. The British placed this possession under the administration of the Agent to the Governor-General. In 1832, Cachar was annexed to Assam. This was followed by annexation of the Jaintia Hills in 1835 and Upper Assam

in 1839. These areas were merged together and formed a Chief Commissioner's province in 1874 and formed a separate province.

With the partition of Bengal in 1905, Assam formed part of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam under a Lieutenant Governor. However, with the recall of the partition plan of 1905 in 1912, the Chief Commissioner provincial status of Assam was restored. In 1921, it was elevated to the Governor's province status.

With the partition of the sub-continent in 1947, the district of Sylhet was ceded to East Bengal which became East Pakistan (and later Bangladesh). Dewangiri in the north Kamrup was given to Bhutan. As a result, the Province of Assam lost a great deal of territory. Still, with the administrative reorganisation that took place, particularly in the early sixties, brought significant territorial depletion of the State. These were due to separation of NEFA in 1948; Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972; and Mizoram in 1972. Today the province of Assam is reduced and confined to the Brahmaputra valley, two hill districts and two Barak valley districts.

Pre-Independence Period

According to the records available, it is clear that Assam was divided into three distinct sectors historically. These were - Kamrup or the western sector; Namrup or the eastern sector; and the portion between the first two was known as the 'Gor' or 'Godhagam'. Assam covered areas with diverse relief, linguistic and ethnic groups, who were alternatively at conflict and peace with each other. Thus, it is found that the Ahom relations with the tribal inhabitants in the hilly periphery alternated between friendliness and hostile relationships.

On the whole, the early records clearly indicated the percentage composition of various linguistic

groups. Suffice it here to state that even the Census reports of 1891 and 1901 described the position of the Assamese speaking population. These were:

Language	1891	1901
Assamese	14,14,285	13,49,694
Bengalee	27,41,947	29,47,916

With the consolidation of the territory, the British began to explore the possibilities of expanding their commercial activities in the region. Moreover, adopting partially for the time being the Ahom system of administration, the British began to introduce administrative reforms at par with their possession in India. This and the commercial activities (particularly exploitation of timber and introduction of plantations) necessitated movement of population that was more familiar with the British administration. Moreover, the province was found to be underpopulated and had the capacity to absorb more population. This induced population movement from the populous Bengal province, who began to fill up the vacancies created by the British commercial activity and extension of transportation and communication facilities in the region.

Immigration and the Immigrants

As stated earlier, the scope of immigration to the region increased after the British initiated their commercial operations in the area. The movement of peasant population from East Bengal to Assam took place effectively in a large scale after 1906. Frequent floods, famines and heavy population pressure on agriculture and the presence of vast virgin lands in the form of forests, swamps and marshes, provided the needed incentives for immigration. These agrarian colonisers along with the plantation labourers began to colonise in large

numbers. They became the pioneers in bringing virgin areas under settlement and were innovators in introducing intensive agricultural practices in the valley area. The composition of the migrants was both Hindus and Muslims.

This large scale movement of population since 1906, began with the initial settlement of Goalpara district and thence extending eastwards across the valley with every successive wave of migrants. The Census Report of 1931, clearly indicated the source regions of this influx of Mymensingh and Sylhet districts in East Bengal. Interestingly enough some of the political elites of the region covertly and overtly encouraged this movement of population to serve their respective aims and goals. The report further quantified the scale of movement according to their area of origin and area of settlement as under.

Immigration into Assam 1911-1931

Area of Settlement	Source of Migration	(in '000)		
		1911	1921	1931
Goalpara Dt.	Mymensingh	77(34)	151(78)	170(80)
Kamrup Dt.	Mymensingh	4(1)	44(30)	170(80)
Darrang Dt.	Mymensingh	7(1)	20(12)	41(30)
Nowgong	Mymensingh	4(1)	58(52)	120(108)
Sibsagar	Sylhet and other areas	14	14	12
Lakhimpur	Sylhet and Mymensingh	14	14	19(2)

Besides these immigrants, there were others from Nepal (mostly in the form of graziers, ex-servicemen, etc.), tea garden labourers from Orissa, Bihar, etc. Marwaris - money lenders and traders who not only established themselves in the towns and tea gardens but also penetrated the interior of the province. Administrative and commercial organisations that were set up to further the colonial interests, created employment opportunities which attracted more immigrants from the south and west. The native population failed to capitalise this and gave way to the immigrants who filled up most of the employment opportunities. Moreover, the colonial administrators did not encourage the native population and kept them intentionally aloof and isolated from the activities of the region. Thus, the immigrants began to occupy government-clerical-administrative positions, staffed the Assam-Bengal railway and the tea and oil industry that gradually expanded its scale of operation in the region. This, in turn, induced the immigrant flow with increased vigour. In short, the immigrants gradually began to exercise influence in the provincial socio-economic and political activities.

The problem and the impact of the immigrants can be easily visualised if the all-India growth rate of population from 1901 to 1971 (i.e., the cumulative growth rate) is considered; on this basis, it is apparent that the 1901 population figures of 3.3 million will eventually become 8 million in 1971 (130% cumulative growth rate at all India average) instead of the Census figures of 15 million for 1971. This illustrates that besides natural growth, artificial growth has been more than significant, and that, the immigrants had continued to increase substantially in the inter-Censal periods. A significant corollary of which is the predominant influence of the immigrant culture in the valley activities. The following table indicates the composition of the valley's population and is in itself self-explanatory.

TABLE

**Composition of Population of Assam
(as per 1971 Census, in lakhs)**

Assam	146.0
Indigenous population	43.5
Others	102.5
Tea labourers	22.5
Immigrant muslims	20.5
Bengali hindus	16.0
Tribals	16.0
Cachar Bengalis	14.0
Nepalis	5.0
Rajbanshi	4.0
Misc.	5.0

Source: B.N. Choudhary, "Socio-Economic Crisis in Assam", Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, Department of Geography, NEHU, Shillong, July, 1981.

Again, according to the 1971 Census, 72.51% (or 106 lakhs) were Hindus, 24.56% (or 35.9 lakhs) were Muslims, 2.61% (or 3.81 lakhs) were Christians and others 0.62%. Linguistically, 60.9% of the population returned their mother tongue as Assamese, 10.9% as Bengali and 5% as Hindi. One of the significant issues was the ascertaining the mother tongue, wherein many of the immigrant communities, with the passage of time, returned Assamese as their mother tongue. This aspect created innumerable problems later on and had its own repercussions. The magnitude of this aspect is clearly evident from the following table:

TABLE

Census Years	Assamese Speakers	Bengali Speakers
1911	0.85 lakhs	3.47 lakhs
1921	1.39 lakhs	4.06 lakhs
1931	1.61 lakhs	4.76 lakhs
1941	No Census taken due to War	
1951	6.87 lakhs	1.93 lakhs
1961	10.21 lakhs	1.85 lakhs

This data is taken from Choudhary, pp.6-7, 1981.

This gave a new twist to the already complex problem. The genesis can be traced back to 1836 when the suggestion of the immigrants to introduce Bengali as the official language was accepted by the administration. The resultant opposition by the native Assamese population culminated in 1874 when the Assamese was re-introduced as the official language. With this beginning, after independence, the language issue became the focus of the problem that was interpreted in as many ways as its dimensions suggested. These were also translated in practical ways and was evident in the following periods:

- i) Linguistic problem during the 1951 Census;
- ii) Linguistic problem during the 1961 Census;
- iii) Linguistic problem during the 1971 Census;
- iv) Linguistic problem during the 1981 Census which started in 1979 and culminated in 1985 as the foreigners movement.

The disturbances started with the initiation of the process of Census enumeration in 1951; the second with the Assamese Language Act of 1960 and the third with the introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction with the assistance of English in Gauhati

and Dibrugarh Universities. The scope and content of this problem had consistent associated itself with the immigrants. This took the expression of discontentment, to fear of being submerged and finally to fulfilled opposition to the immigrants. Throughout the valley, the feeling of support and opposition co-existed but were foremost in the districts of Goalpara and Cachar. Besides this, antagonism within the valley milieu in the early 1960's also saw the movement.

The Beginning of the Movement

The revision of the voters list for the Mangaldai constituency (parliamentary) became controversial and ignited the fuse of what later turned out to be a full scale movement against the immigrants or the foreigners in Assam. The basic premises of the movement included detection, deletion and deportation of the aliens/foreigners/illegal immigrants.

The organisation that pioneered against this was aware of the consequences of immigration on the socio-economic and political activities of the native inhabitants. This organisation was the All Assam Students Union (AASU), which found large scale anomalies in the electoral list that was in existence and which was revised for the Mangaldai Parliamentary Constituency. Their stand on the issue vindicated when discrepancies were found, the AASU found itself to have greater credibility. This attracted other organisations which were patronised by leading elements of the Assamese society. Their manifestos were made in order to foster their way of life and culture. Some of these organisations which joined the AASU in the initial stage were - Jatiyabadi Dal, Purbanchal Lok Parishad and the Asom Sahitya Sobha. Thus, reinforced, the AASU began to formulate mass programme to educate the native population about the magnitude of the problem and its consequences that were highlighted by

faulty and discriminatory electoral list. They put forward their claim that the voter's list of all the remaining thirteen constituencies in the state should be reviewed and corrected.

The implications of such a demand was obvious to all and more specifically to the immigrant populations that had settled and had their stakes in the region well entrenched. More significantly, however, it was the impact of the movement on the neighbouring states that assumed geopolitical importance. In short, adequate encouragement and acceleration of the movement ignited the process of destabilisation and forces of disruption in the whole region.

In the logical plane, the issue of illegal immigrants was consequential in its impact and the resultant responses justified. But the same cannot be said about the way in which the movement developed in succeeding years and the way in which this was interpreted by the elements in the neighbouring states. One of the obvious references was that, with increasing momentum, the movement gradually moved away from its objectives. The movement attracted elements who found temporary alliances with AASU, advantageous as it provided adequate legitimacy to fulfill their short term plans in fostering their eventual objectives. This also partially assumed a communal basis which short term fusion portended long term conflagration as it ultimately did happen. The latter may be attributed to factors outside the movement's purview, but still the movement was forced to take the responsibility for it.

As noted earlier, coming together of various elements of the state environment can be viewed as an event with much larger portends than the immigrant issue itself. The constituent parties of the movement consisted of plains tribals and the native inhabitants with different backgrounds. The move

against the foreigners was the first step towards formulating a platform upon which subsequent exaggerations were built upon. Moreover, these events encouraged partisan attitudes to get well entrenched and which in turn were influenced by national and international currents. Suffice it to say here that this politically organised coherent movement, in principle, paved the way for other ethno-national movements to prosper and provide possible solution to their respective problems. In fact, the architects of the movement found themselves in a growing paradoxical situation when they became helpless spectators. This was apparent when the coalition partners of the movement, latter, began to clamour and organise movement to have their demands fulfilled. This was the same position which the State Government found itself when the AAGSP movement was at its ascendancy.

Be that as it may, the AASU and the Purbanchal Lok Parishad merged on 27th August, 1979 at Jorhat to form the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad. In the joint deliberations that followed this merger other associations and organisations also merged with the AAGSP to form a united front. These organisations were:

- i) Asom Jatiyabadi Dal (AJD)
- ii) Asom Sahitya Sobha (ASS)
- iii) Asom Jatiyabadi Yuba Parishad Chatra (AJYPC)
- iv) Asom Yuba Samaj (AYS)
- v) Young Lawers Forum (YLF)
- vi) Bodo Sahitya Sobha (BSS)
- vii) All Assam Tribal Sangha (AATS)
- viii) Progressive Plain Tribal Council of Asom (PPTCA)

Collectively under the banner of AAGSP, this movement gradually spread all over the State. With this achieved, AAGSP was able to provide the motivation force to the politically conscious

population. In this, both the State and the Centre was unable to either function effectively or resolve the issue successfully. Ambivalence and hesitation in arriving at decisions were characteristics of the period between 1979 and 1985. Failure to receive positive responses to its demand, compelled the AAGSP to initiate series of steps that increased the intensity of the movement. These steps can be broadly classified as -

- a) Bandhs
- b) Agitations
- c) Rail Roko and Rasta Roko
- d) Gheraos and boycott
- e) Blockade of movement of goods
- f) Other forms which were exploited by fanatical elements to the discredit the movement.

Each of these steps that were resorted to, was aimed at definite goals and results. Fortunately, lack of response did not discourage the AAGSP. They intensified the frequency of steps and in the process involved the entire valley population. The administration was found wanting in many ways and the socio-economic relations worsened. Even a series of negotiations between the AAGSP and the Centre did not bring the desired immediate results.

It was at this time, by the end of 1984, after the General Elections that the prospects of settlement brightened when the AAGSP was called for resuming the negotiations. This culminated in the signing of the Assam Accord in August 1985. Through the provisions of the Accord, the AAGSP was able to have state elections. It was renamed as Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). This went a long way in resolving the basic issues of the state while suitable measures were promulgated to protect the interests of the Assamese population.

The principles on which the movement gathered and accelerated has to be lauded, for it found credibility and acceptance. This was reinforced by the results of the state elections which took place by the end of 1985, when the state's population placed their trust on the AGP. It was able to achieve unity against the background of common problem that was never possible to do earlier.

But, in its wake, this also indicated the potential after effects of the movement that latter corroded the united platform on which the movement was built. Deep fissures and differences between the constituent groups emerged along with differences in approach and identification of priorities. Despite this, the AAGSP became the dominant regional party (AGP) which after assuming office of the government reallocated the priorities and translated its objectives in defined parameters.

However, in the process, the fears of the minority coalition partners, began to press their priorities which were considered in isolation. Failure to resolve or failure in understanding the greater objectives of the state, resulted in the re-emergence of alternative focus of regional power in the valley. Each unit began to stress on their identity and the need to have their rightful share. As a result, micro-regional movements began to emerge all through the region. Over and above this, there was also the unimplemented and untranslated sections of the Accord that was used to respective advantages. The foreigners issue continues to be bogged down by various technical and implementational difficulties.

Concluding Remarks

The movement against the immigrants can be viewed as an ethno-national expression of the native inhabitants that was spearheaded by the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad. It was a political expression

that translated its (the populations) discontentment against the historical injustice of being swamped by immigrants from one section of the Sub-Continent. This was a geopolitical phenomena for which neither the state nor the centre had any definite answer or alternative solution that was accepted by all to a large measure. The movement indicated the degrees to which the unity between the diverse elements in the state's population can be woven. At the same time, it also indicated, that once this unity on a common problem was achieved or there were distinct possibilities of the problem being solved, there was clear break up of the constituent elements of the coalition partners of the movement.

Significantly, the movement has re-emphasised the region's peripherality in the national scenario; the centre has viewed the state as peripheral and its economy dependent. While the state has always viewed the centre's response to its demand as peripheral. Linguistic-cultural character of the movement exposed more than what was apparent and it was this aspect that latter surfaced openly. The All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad of the movement became the Assam Gana Parishad after the Accord and the elections in 1985 and had to contend with desperate elements. These elements asserted their respective micro-regional bias and autonomy after the accord was signed and parts of which like elections, etc. were implemented. These elements emphasized the federal character of the state's organisation, and accordingly wanted granting of autonomy to all the tribal groups in the state. In this regard, it must be noted that the population content and distribution besides resources formed the major geographical theme of the movement. A cursory look at the map of Assam clearly reveals that the parts of the districts of Kokrajhar, Kamrup, Sonitpur, Nagaon and Dhubri, have substantial percentage of tribal population and these inhabitants

fearing the growing impact of the majority population, have continued their movement.

Besides these, the dormant issues like the boundary controversies with the adjacent states, particularly Nagaland and Meghalaya has surfaced. These have once again illustrated a distinct frontier characteristics that ran parallel to the Centre-State relationships.

In summing up, it is clear that the role perception of the AGP has to significantly re-adjust to the changing interpretation of the geopolitics of the region. It's earlier stand as the AAGSP vindicated and achieved, it has to set itself to the task of State building and resolve issues emanating from the compulsions of location.