



ASSAM CHALLENGE

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K M L CHHABRA

The book places the central issue of Assam agitation in its historical perspective by tracing the genesis of the foreigner's problem to the political, economic and social factors that influenced the course of events over several decades. The failure of both the State government and the Centre to appreciate the gravity of the problem posed by post-partition migration is examined along with the perceptions of different political parties and how their preconceived notions on the emotive issue complicated the efforts for a negotiated settlement.

The post accord scenario, with the central question of preparation of electoral rolls still in dispute, is made grimmer by the rise of ULFA which has escalated its activities beyond the borders of the State. The book projects the foreigner's issue in Assam essentially as a challenge of 'identity', which is particularly important in a polyglot State. It also stresses the need for an informed debate on how far the assertions of identity could be tolerated in harmony with the constitutional framework.

K.M.L. CHHABRA, after graduating with Honours in English literature, did his Masters in Economics from Delhi University. He joined the Indian Administrative Service and was posted to Tamil Nadu where he held several important posts. He also served the Central Government in economic affairs and was the Minister (Economic) in the Indian Embassy, Tokyo, 1974-1977 when Japan was assuming an important role in the Aid India Consortium.

Posted subsequently to the Home Ministry, Chhabra dealt with Centre-State relations, Union Territory administration and Assam affairs. His association with the North-East began when he was posted as Officer on Special Duty in the aftermath of the Assam-Nagaland border flare-up. After the Assam problem erupted, he was placed incharge of Assam affairs. Because of his specialisation in the North-East he was posted as Chief Secretary, Sikkim, 1984-1987. Chhabra has since retired from the IAS.

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K. M. L. CHHABRA



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*Dedicated to
RADHIKA
my daughter*

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Foreword

THE Assam agitation on the foreigners issue has been one of the complex and baffling challenges faced by the country since independence. In my capacity as Law Minister in the Union Cabinet for most part of the period during the course of the agitation I have applied my mind to it and tried to grasp the complexities of the problem.

The Assam Accord had produced an unprecedented euphoria. Hopes that the accord would bring to close the agonising period witnessed since the Assam agitation has been belied. Assam problem made more complex with Bodoland movement and ULFA is very much on the national agenda.

Though several books giving chronological and episodic account of the agitation on the foreigners issue are available, 'the Gut Issue' as the book describes it has not been focussed upon before. The book, therefore, makes a significant contribution in enhancing the understanding of the core problem. The author has delved into relevant sources like Lok Sabha debates, Sardar Patel's Correspondence, Censuses etc. and painstakingly brought out the interplay of history, geography, economic and social factors impinging on the polity of Assam. Tracing the genesis of the problem to migration starting at the beginning of the 20th century it acquired a different complexion and composition after partition.

Nation-building requires a different paradigm capable of harmonising competing loyalties and conflicting interests and not a legalistic and inflexible approach. Discussions on foreigners issue were bogged down in terminological exactitudes whereas the problem involved human beings and national commitments. Unless the core issue is grasped squarely it is difficult to fashion a practical course of action

and a durable and satisfactory solution to the problem would remain elusive.

The book has attempted to place the central issue in clearest possible terms and set out various implications of alternative approaches. The classical dilemma of national identity coexisting with several layers of identities on different planes in a pluralistic society has been posed in the book with remarkable insight about the interplay of multiplicity of factors. Bodoland and a host of demands about assertion of identities from different ethnic minorities need to be appreciated in the context of emerging policy. ULFA has added a different dimension underscoring the need for clearly defining limits about assertion of identity and autonomy as otherwise unbridled claims would threaten the integrity and unity of the country.

The author brings to bear his vast administrative experience in sensitizing complex issues and focussing on concepts and linkages so critical to comprehensive understanding. The book apart from providing useful reference material will be of immense interest and relevance to legislators, jurists and administrators.

221, Sector 9C
CHANDIGARH

JAGAN NATH KAUSHAL
*Former Union Minister of Law,
Justice & Company Affairs
Government of India*

Preface

IT would be legitimate to ask why this book when Assam problem has been with us for several years now. The answer is found in the question itself. The problem has not only persisted with unrelenting obstinacy but acquired sinister dimensions. It spills over to the neighbouring states in the North East and the ripple effect of the problem and the remedies sought have the potential of encouraging ethnic explosion and unleashing of centrifugal forces elsewhere in different parts of the country.

Turbulence in Assam and the North East has become endemic. Even after the Accord in 1985 and coming to power by Assam Gana Parishad, the problem has defied solution. The situation today is far more complex with the reinduction of army to curb ULFA's activities. Leaders of Bodoland movement have already served notice to launch a fresh phase of agitational activities. The Autonomous status for Karbi Anglong District Demand Committee is not lagging behind in its preparation for reviving the agitation.

The cascading violence threatening the integrity of the country has failed to jolt us into questioning our premises, perceptions and prescriptions of policy found to be woefully out of alignment with the emerging forces. Without a clear grasp of the issues underlying the malaise the response has been characterized by a degree of tentativeness and equivocation. The book attempts to disentangle myths and imaginary grievances that have tended to cloud the discussions and focus on the 'gut issue'.

Foreigner's issue was not a 'genie' invented by Assam students. It had been in the making since the beginning of this century when migration of people from Bengal into Assam started. Before Inde-

pendence, it had manifested itself in several ways resulting in an atmosphere of distrust amongst different sections of people in Assam. However, after partition it acquired different connotations. Illegal entry into Assam was only one dimension of the problem. A more complex dimension was the perennial stream of refugees from across the borders in varying numbers to which the country could not shut its doors. Grievances of Assamese were genuine because of the swelling numbers which apart from competing for limited educational, economic and employment opportunities were causing cultural strains.

The issues raised by Assam movement are fundamental. What is the place of ethnicity in a pluralistic set up like India. How far can our framework be stretched to accommodate ethnic identities in a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic country. These concerns are relevant to the country as a whole. If we are to set country's ship on course, our compass should be in order and instruments sensitized to emit and receive alarm signals in case of storms and reefs etc. The intention of the book in tracing genesis of the Assam problem and placing it in historical perspective is to provide insights into the complexities of the issues involved. The course of the movement and the response of the government during the agitation have been described at length not for apportioning blame but to serve as aids for a better understanding of the impasse and for formulating appropriate package of measures for dealing with it.

A word on Post-Script to the book is due. Assam problem is not over with the signing of the Accord. Alienation is assuming menacing proportions not only in Assam but elsewhere also. The answer to dilemmas facing the country would have to be found by engaging in a mature debate and fashioning of a national consensus. The problem is not of the State Government alone or of any one section of people. If the book helps to highlight the central concerns it would have served its purpose.

It has not been easy to treat the highly emotive subject in a de-romanticised manner. For one who has experienced travails of partition being less than objective on issues impinging on the unity of the country would be unthinkable.

K.M.L. CHHABRA

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