

# Assam : Ignoring reality

By B. N. Sur

WHAT is at stake in Assam is not the sceptical fear that the linguistic cultural identity of the Assamese people is on the verge of extinction but the post-independence attempt to build a New India on the plane of political consciousness. To a cautious observer, without a cynical bent of mind, the argument that India was never politically united has its appeal and impact. The protagonists of this school of thought vociferously proclaim that India was politically united only when the Britishers landed up here with their experience of political administration and culture at home, although, their applied experience in India was constitutional to them but not democratic to India. By subsidiary argument, this theory substantiates that traditionally, India is politically apathetic.

When one witnesses, of course, detachedly, the debates amongst various co-herent groups of Assam and its neighbourhood or collects data to scientifically model laws of the development, one encounters an environment, where each cohesive group is awfully providing defence for their infallibility. Nowhere, it seems, they are even a little aware of the reality that the fate of each group precariously hangs in balance to the larger and sovereign concept of Indianhood. The scope of developing and consolidating the constitution concept of Indianhood is being criminally assaulted by the various groups. These infightings pathetically damage the growth of Indian consciousness. "We, the people of India"... rebukes.

If Assam belongs to the Assamese-speaking people, Bengal belongs to Bengali-speaking people and Punjab, for that matter, belongs to Gurumukhi-speaking people. Such categories could be multiplied. The question then is India belongs to whom? Everything being alright in Assam and so to say, in the entire emotionally surcharged North-Eastern region except the voluntary negligence to protect and further the cause of Indian brotherhood. If India as a reality in all its dimensions exists, in sovereignty exists, so exist every individual and group in different variable identities.

Although, it was not prudent to demarcate areas of local political administration on the linguistic pattern forgetting that India is a multi-lingual country, to help develop and flourish local sub-culture in and around linguistic identity but that the division of States, thus, serves the function of political administration should not be belittled. In any case, historical mistakes take their own premium. But history unfolds both according to free choice and forces beyond control. Therefore, this Himalayan blunder could be redeemed.

My endeavour here is to convince the readers that the conscious attempt of an individual or a group to identify slowly but surely with the abstract concept of Indianhood at the higher level does not go beyond most concrete and nearer local attachments. The omnipotent human

spirit is not existentialist in nature permanently. He needs support psychologically, in a social group at the same wavelength always. The process of elevation from individualism to Indianhood is a continuous process and it makes its way through many hurdles. The leaders in society are the central points of inspiration and they are the prime-movers.

Secondly, the tumult situation in Assam and elsewhere in the region is basically a projection of the destructive desirability to identify language with the State power. State power is neutral, which does not mean that it is inactive. Otherwise it cannot discriminate between universal good and evil. Every individual and group culture under a sovereign State has every democratic right to exist and flourish on this earth subject to the condition that these groups are mutually complimentary and do not challenge the existence of society. Those social realities, which cannot exist without the uncertain support of the external political power cannot but forfeit its sovereignty.

Thirdly, it is gaining currency in the Indian mind that some linguistic or tribal groups, which are less developed are prone to annihilation by the powerful time-tested linguistic groups. The former, in their formative period, are in an existential crisis. More powerful linguistic groups, as they say, could devour tiny linguistic groups and eventually dethrone the weak linguistic or tribal groups from their position of political command. This is true. But what is the solution? This fear has its root in our view that a linguistic group has its right for a geo-political entity, where it could rule. The solution, at the first step, is to delink language from State power.

But again what is the protection of such linguistic groups, which are materially weak to safeguard themselves from the onslaught of the powerful dominant language groups, specially, under such curious circumstances, when a large-scale change of residence, i.e., migration of the powerful linguistic groups to an area inhabited by less powerful groups has taken place and consequently, challenges the existence of the weak linguistic groups? Such social phenomenon creates suspicion and hatred, jealousy and inferiority complex. If we accept the thesis that, the fittest would survive, then, the jungle rule is not far behind.

On the contrary, the experience in Jammu and Kashmir, where special constitutional provisions have been provided to protect the indigenous sub-culture (in the context of Indian culture) and more recently, the legislations of the Governments of Meghalaya and Tripura are pointers. This sort of temporary arrangement has its negative dimension. It would stop the process of migration, which is a necessary element of normal population adjustment and equilibrium. Migration is an instrument of culture diffusion and social integration. The two extremes could be resolved by providing equal opportunities to all the accelerating upward social mobility strictly on talent. Unequal competition is

undemocratic but the spirit of sportive and equal competition is a catalyst for social growth. Here, a defeatist is not an anarchist or escapist.

The emotional but powerful movement in Assam and elsewhere in the adjoining States is a phenomenon, which could be defined as 'negative self-defence'. The numerically-strong majority of non-Assamese people taken together has threatened the political command of the Assamese people. The notion that language and political command are synthetically interlinked, therefore, their fear of erosion of culture is apparently genuine, though, in the ultimate analysis, it is misplaced. Independent of political patronage, a culture can grow and sustain. This culture could frame its structure free from any external remote control. Political protection negates the vitality and longevity of any culture. Buddhism evaporated from the face of the earth with the downfall of Ashoka's empire. If this position is accepted, then, the "cultural clash" in the region ceases to exist.

The culture of an individual onward towards any level of coherent group formation could be protected and developed by the dedicated hard work and creative struggle of its constituents. There is no short-cut. The internal causes for backwardness are to be identified and eliminated rather than fighting an external enemy, which is a reality, because of the perception of the truth of internal causes. The external exists because the internal is perceived.

It is abundantly clear that the state-of-affairs in Assam could not be studied in isolation to the developments in the neighbouring areas and the developments in the entire region, as a whole, should not be looked into complete compartmentalisation from the consciousness growing in the individual and groups to assert themselves. It is a sort of social awakening. The leadership in the country should be on guard against probable dissipation of mass energy.

Moreover, the volcanic eruptions in the region simply uncovered the Pandora's box in which the contradictions and conflicts, are piled up through several decades. The inputs have been most graciously given by the politics of intrigue, conspiracy and outright negligence of the economic development of the region by the political administration and social voluntary organisations both at the national and local level. The leaders in society have failed miserably.

A great chunk of Indian population has been alienated from the mainstream. When some privileged areas develop and shine, when

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the fruit of GNP is siphoned off to certain pockets, the most introvert and self-satisfied people in this panoramic landscape get infuriated. When large tracts of jungle land are stripped off and the inhabitants are exposed to the materialistic modernity—they daze, simply.

There have been large-scale natural migration. The mass migration from East Bengal to Assam in late 18th century was facilitated by the introduction of steam engine in 1846. And, now, hopefully nobody could define who is a foreigner? Anyone, who is termed a foreigner on legal grounds hits back claiming naturalisation on the moral plane. The two-nations' theory has its opponents in both camps now and the proposition that some immigrants are infiltrators and others are refugees is a too simplistic solution for a gigantic and complex problem of human relationship like this. All are in agony and an avoidable communication gap rebukes everybody. Cannot this impending tragedy be transformed to a beautiful smile in the jungle of this frontier—sensitive, and potentially most explosive strategic land mass?

In fine, as the human physiological system is endowed with some mechanism to deal with some specific diseases naturally, so also society has its internal inbuilt mechanism by which it can cure social ills. It is naturopathy and has its days in this frontier region. It is too late for a peaceful solution of the problems in Assam and elsewhere in the neighbourhood, where demands from conflicting groups are in themselves violent.

There is need for a new outlook and a new perspective. The eternal elements from the past would remain eternally now and forever.

Only great souls could rescue "the caravan of India as concocted by Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi a great son of India, which has deeply embroiled in this part of India where he once created a glorious history in the days of the independence struggle.