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## **Bengal Renaissance and Assamese Modernism: Epistemic Disquiet of the Native Self**

**Jyotirmoy Prodhani<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*The paper looks at the crucial transformations of cultural and intellectual history of Assam in the wake of the Bengal Renaissance leading to the formation of what can be termed as the 'modernist consciousness of Assam' that had kindled a deep sense of emancipation as well as legacies of ambivalences and destabilities, for it had brought in a fresh wind of progressive social ethos and also warrants of defeat to the vernacular syntax of social and cultural mores. The paper problematises the Renaissance of colonial Bengal not only as instrumental in the formation of a new capital of learning but also as an era of shifting and dislocating of the traditional centres and institutions of power and social pedagogy. The paper underlines that Assam is one such state where the ethos of the Bengal Renaissance has been one of its most significant legacies through which had evolved Assam's transformative rationality of modernism and at the same time, quite significantly, had also been a catalyst to engender cultural disquiet and epistemic anxieties.*

### **I**

The flowering of modern intellectual exercise in India, or to be more precise, 'modernism' under colonial tutelage, can be said to have been largely coincided with that of the setting up of the 'Asiatick' Society in Calcutta by William Jones on 15 January, 1784 and the subsequent publication of the journal, *Asiatick Researches* in 1788. This had heralded the new intellectual beginning in colonial India. The first issue of the journal published an article by Jones which was a comparison of the Gods and Goddesses of Greece, Rome and India. In one of his Asiatic Society lectures he had argued, "The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than Greek, more copious than Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either (of them)." (in Dasgupta 2011:30) Jones, in fact, became a major storehouse of Indian knowledge whose knowledge of Persian and Sanskrit was exemplary for he learnt the languages under Muslim maulvis and Brahmin pundits. Through him

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many Indian texts became familiar in Europe including the Sanskrit plays of Kalidasa. Ironically, the Indian readers became more aware and attracted to these classical writings through the new intellectual interests shown to them in Europe and the West, which can be defined as a sort of 'revised orientalism'. In a significant way, it was Jones who had laid the foundation for the 're-discovery' and 're-understanding' of the Indian texts making a seminal impact on the way the Bengal Renaissance was to bloom. Subrata Dasgupta therefore writes, "If the Bengal Renaissance was a revolution that created a new consciousness, that created a new kind of Indian mind, Jones must be seen as one of the progenitors of this revolution, a begetter of this mind." (2011:25) This 'revolution' found its most remarkable germination in what is called the 19<sup>th</sup> century *Bengal Renaissance* which had emphatically placed itself as one of the primary referents for India's evolution into a 'modern' transformative intellectual regime.

Anthony Giddens argues that like coloniality modernism too is a Western invention (1990). Decolonial theorist, Walter D. Mignolo, has also defined modernity as the 'darker side of coloniality' (2007). The emerging discourse of decoloniality, however, has located the formation and operations of modernism as essentially emanating from colonialism. The recent school of critical thoughts that have emerged in the form of 'Decolonial Option', pioneered by the thinkers like Peruvian sociologist, Anibal Quijano, US based Argentinian theorist, Walter D. Mignolo, Russian philosopher, Madina Tlostanova *et al* who have defined modernism in terms of the epistemic matrix of *coloniality/ modernity/ rationality* dynamics, have provided an alternative ontology to reassess the supposed sanctity associated with the modernity praxis. While critiquing the advent of modernity, the decolonial thinkers have underlined modernism as an unfinished agenda of the 'logic of coloniality' (Mignolo). Madina Tlostanova has pointed out that the 'logic of coloniality' is linked to the Western hegemony. And the decolonial option, she asserts, "radically questions the existing system of knowledge production, disciplinary spheres and epistemic modes and methodologies." (2013) Modernity in India has effectively emerged through its exposure to the Western discourse of rationality of which Marx has been one of the core influences.<sup>1</sup> Discourses of Western rationality, nevertheless, has remained as abiding idioms and one of the central motivations for the subsequent initiatives towards achieving a transformative and progressive social order essentially endorsable by the western matrices of enlightenment. In a significant way this has found its remarkable manifestations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal Renaissance that has emphatically placed itself as one of India's most influential epistemic referents.

Walter D. Mignolo in his essay, "Coloniality: The Darker Side of Modernity" (2017) refers to Anthony Giddens when he says that modernity is a Western invention and argues that coloniality too is an invention of the West. "Therefore", he writes, "it seems very difficult to overcome coloniality from a Western modern perspective." (2017:48) He argues that the rhetoric of modernity, which includes the seemingly emancipatory ideals like salvation, newness, progress, development etc., in fact, went hand in hand with the 'logic of coloniality'. He sums up with the emphatic conviction

that “*modernity/ coloniality are two sides of the same coin. Coloniality is constitutive of modernity; (therefore) modernity cannot be without coloniality*” (2017:48, italics mine). He further warns that even postmodernity and ‘altermodernity’ cannot get rid of this predicament apart from providing a mask at best to hide it.

### Modernism in Assam

Assam’s history of modernism too is intrinsically linked with the historical trajectory of colonialism, both as a source of transformative social dynamics and also as a cause of subterranean cultural anxiety. The major proponents of the 19<sup>th</sup> century modernism in Assam like Gunabhiram Barua, Anandaram Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, Chandra Kumar Agarwalla and others were all exposed to the great intellectual movements that had occurred in the wake of the Renaissance of colonial Bengal. They, in fact, obtained the early idioms of cultural modernism literally from the soil of Bengal. After all, the early modern texts in Assamese were produced in Calcutta in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century like the first Assamese literary magazine, *Jonaki*, which was launched in 1889 by a group of Assamese students at Presidency College of Calcutta. This magazine played a crucial role in the movement for modern Assamese literature. Among the social movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Assam the initiatives for widow remarriage, abolition of child marriage and opposition to polygamy were significant reformist initiatives under the active leadership of Gunabhiram Barua who, being immensely influenced by Ishwar Chandra Vidysagar, used to frequently write his column under the pseudonym, ‘An Assamese from Calcutta’ in the first Assamese periodical, *Orunodoi* (1847-1883). This was also the period when a section of emerging elites of Assam, including Gunabhiram Barua, embraced the Brahma Dharma, a major and somewhat elitist spiritual order of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal<sup>2</sup>. Gunabhiram Barua was initiated to the Brahma faith at Dhubri, which was the headquarters of Goalpara district in lower Assam. (Guha, 2006:19)

Gunabhiram Barua’s *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukanor Jivan Caritra* (Biography of Anandaram Deheliyal Phukan published in 1880, considered to be the first biography in prose in modern Assamese), the *Bezbaroa Granthavali* (writings of Laxminath Bezbaroa, reprinted in 1968), Padmavati Devi’s first Assamese novel, *Sudharmar Upakhyay* (1884) and numerous other literary writings of the time heralded the onset of Assamese cultural and literary modernism which was substantially informed by the ethos prevailing in Bengal Renaissance. Tilottoma Misra in the erudite introduction to her translation of *Ramnabami Natak*, (2007) giving an account of the 19<sup>th</sup> century transformation of Assamese society, argues that the social activism in Assam that began post 1826, the year of Anglo Burmese Yandaboo treaty through which Assam became part of the British colony, was the ‘result of the colonial encounter’ and that it drew ‘inspiration constantly from Calcutta.’ She writes that the “city of Calcutta came to symbolize all that was modern and ‘progressive’ in ‘Western culture.’”(2007:xvi) And, ironically, the geographical imaginary of the west for Assam was just beyond the western border of the state, across the border line of the old Goalpara district

(later in 1901 when Golakganj railway junction was established, it became the first railway station of Assam immediately after Bengal). Eminent historians and thinkers like H.K. Barpujari, Amalendu Guha, Udayon Misra, Sanjoy Hazarika *et al*, in their well-informed works have underlined the role of Bengal in the consolidation of nationalistic consciousness in Assam in the form of political as well as linguistic nationalism. It should be noted that modernism in Assam is not only a narrative of liberal intellectual discourses; it was also a juncture of ruptures and social disorientations. The cultural historians and critics have analysed how the British colonial rule and the subsequent eminence of Bengali culture, language and ethos had substantially stirred, and motivated the crystallization of the complex narratives of nationalistic articulations in Assam way back in 1828 with various set of agendas including reinstatement of the native Ahom nobility, restoration of the Assamese language as well as the legal recognition to the indigenous social customs among other despite those being apparently incommensurable to the growing dominance of Bengal's intellectual perceptions of Assam. The Bengal Renaissance was evolved through the propagation of a new set of social codes, religious customs, language, intellectual discourses, cultural practices and a whole new epistemic dynamics that had effectively brought progressive energy to the land and also had warranted the destabilization of its native discourses. The process Slavoj Žižek would define as a new 'Symbolic Order'.

### **Assam and the Renaissance of Colonial Bengal**

The Renaissance of colonial Bengal had its own impact in Assam not only as a new discourse of enlightenment but also as a process of discursive subjectivization. Renaissance emerged with a set of values to constitute a new 'Symbolic Order'. In the context of Assam, the state of Bengal, with which Assam had long historical linkages of constant strife since the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, popularly referred to as the land of the 'Bongals' (the invading Turks *Deodhai Asom Buranji* 83-84, *Assam Buranji* 51-52) and later, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mostly as a *bilaat* (foreign land); ironically became a new reference point to reconstitute its own social and cultural structures by effectively dislocating the existing ethos of spiritual, social, cultural and political discourses of the land. The post Yandaboo exposure to Bengal ushered in an era of 'modern values' to Assam under the colonial patronage which had engendered a fresh enthusiasm and energy and also anxiety among the native inhabitants who found their own world being progressively destabilized and epistemically invalidated. This anxiety found its early manifestations in the ideological conflict between the traditional landed gentry and the nobilities of the Ahom royalty, the *Dangorias*, on the one hand and the neo elites armed with colonial education from Bengal, the Assamese *bhadroloks* on the other.

The *Dangorias* took up the leadership to initiate a political revolt against the British between 1828 and 1830 and again in 1857. To the visiting British judge, A.J. Moffatt Mill, Maniram Dewan, who would be later executed by the British, submitted a strong memorandum seeking restoration of the lost power and authority of the Ahom kings and

the Ahom nobilities. He had also protested against the repressive tax regime imposed on the farmers, handing over of several *mouzas* (local administrative territories) to the ‘Bengalees from Sylhet’ and the Marwari traders by depriving the native ‘respectable Assamese’. He had also placed his strong protests against the imposition of new customs and rules through the establishments of ‘innumerable courts, unjust system of taxation and the objectionable treatment of the Hill Tribes’. On the other hand, Anandaram Dehkiyal Phukan, an ‘enlightened’ Assamese elite, had demanded in his memorandum of 1853 the restoration of the Assamese language in Assam (it may be noted that Assamese language was replaced by Bengali language in 1837, however, it was restored on 19 April, 1873), increasing the number of courts and appointment of native judges in those courts including abolition of the monopoly of the excised opium and implementation of compulsory registration of marriages. (Guha 2014:16-17) Maniram Dewan and Anandaram Dekiyal Phukan represented two different sets of class interests; when Maniram Dewan wanted the restitution of the native ruling class, Anandaram Dekiyal Phukan was keen to seek the British patronage to constitute a new class of elites primarily through services under the colonial rulers. When Anandaram was apparently in favour of the colonial rule, Maniram Dewan, on the other hand, despite having praised certain aspects of the British rule, was primarily critical of the colonial regime. When Anandaram was the ‘product of the modern age of enlightenment (who) got his inspiration from the contemporary Bengal Renaissance’ (Guha 17), Maniram Dewan, on the other hand, was a ‘revivalist’ who, in the eyes of the British, as described by A.J. Moffat Mill, was ‘discontented, clever, untrustworthy and intriguing’ (Mills 516-517 qtd in Sengupta 295) and who would be executed for his anti-imperialist role in the 1857 uprising.

Renaissance is associated with the revival of art and literature in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. In the Indian context we largely understand this as a literary and intellectual movement mainly in the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal. However, the most epochal literary and cultural movement in Eastern India occurred way back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Assam under the leadership of the great Vaishnavite reformer Srimanta Sankardeva during the rule of the powerful Koch king, Maharaj Naranarayan. In fact, the great literary movement in Assam can be traced as early as in the 14<sup>th</sup> century during the rule of the Koch king Durlabh Narayan (1330-1340) who had commissioned translation of several Sanskrit texts into native languages including the composition of the folk mythologies like the *Manasa Mangal* kavya. This was also the time around which the *Ramayana* was translated into Assamese by Madhava Kandali which happened to be the first translation of the epic in any regional language in North India. (B.K. Barua 10-12) However, the modern colonial Renaissance of Bengal of the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned out to be a guiding framework of modern, ‘progressive’ transformation. Tilottoma Misra writes, “The colonial efforts of opening up new communication links with the rest of the country in order to facilitate trade and administrative work, provided the much needed impetus to the *educated Assamese* to seize the new opportunities and to assert their identity as a nation.” (xv) One might ask as to who were those educated

Assamese that were eager to seize the 'new opportunity'. Significantly, they were not the members of the indigenous ethnic natives of Assam or the Ahom gentry who were in power till the Yandaboo treaty (1826), but the 'new opportunity' seekers, were the new educated Assamese, the *bhadraloks*, who exclusively belonged, as in Bengal, to the high castes such as the Brahmins, Kayasthas and the Daivjnas. About the *bhadraloks* of Bengal Subrata Dasgupta says that in order to carry out their colonial governance the British needed brokers, agents, revenue collectors, managers, lawyers and also Indian middlemen and therefore they had formed a new class of people in the form of the *bhadraloks*. Dasgupta writes, "These middlemen in Bengal became the core of the Bengali *bhadralok*". (Dasgupta 58) They had effectively served the colonial masters as the most efficient agents for the successful establishment of the British rule in the colonised territories. But unlike Bengal, there occurred a direct clash of interest in Assam between the native aristocrats, the *Dangorias*, and the neo elites, the caste Hindu *bhadraloks*. The Bengali *bhadraloks* did not have to face such challenges as, being ruled by the Turks and the Mughals for a long six hundred years at a stretch, the indigenous aristocrats of Bengal prior to colonisation were mostly decimated and were effectively displaced in the medieval period itself.

However, ironically, Assam's colonial Renaissance is crucially associated with an outsider, quite literally. It was one Lakshminarayan Brahmachari of south India who got the lucrative post of Duaria Barua of Hadira Choky port near the present Guwahati from the Ahom King, Gaurinath Singha, against the annual contract of Rs. 10,000 in cash and Rs. 70,000 in kinds. Brahmachari, who had come to Assam by abandoning his family in South India, turned to be rather lucky. By the sheer good luck as he would have it, the British took hold of Assam in 1826 and the current king, Chandrakanta Singha, became a fugitive. Therefore, Brahmachari did not have to pay anything to the king. The celibate Brahmachari, however, adopted orphan children, six boys and a girl, who were brought up after his *gotra* and were looked after by him with utmost care. Subsequently, this new Brahmin family assumed authority and importance in the new era of colonial rule through Captain David Scott who came to Assam with his army to fight the Burmese. Brahmachari's adopted sons Holiram Dhekial Phukon became the Sirastadar of Lower Assam and his brother, Jaganram Barua, a Police Superintendent. (Misra xviii)

History has peculiar dimensions of advantages and disadvantages which have remained rather infamously relative and inconsistent. The post-Plassey Bengal (1757) was the first to have been colonized, which might appear as devastation but in effect it turned out to be the most formidable catalyst to completely alter the power structure in favour of those who were earlier vanquished by the Turks in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The colonialism in Bengal shifted power from the traditional seats of authority of the Muslim rulers and the Nawabs to a new class of people mostly belonging to the Hindu high castes. The seats of power like Murshidabad, Dhaka, Patna and others lost their authority to a newly built commercial outpost that would become the first capital of colonial India- Calcutta. With the shifting of political power, the cultural capital too has been

shifted to the new location having empowered a new class of elites, notably the high caste Hindus, who were for a long time largely remained in the sidelines of power in Bengal. One distinctive feature of the altered power dynamics in Bengal can be discerned by looking at the pantheon of the Renaissance protagonists who happened to be primarily from the high caste Hindu folds with hardly an indigenous native or even a Muslim figuring in the venerable list. Colonial Assam too was not quite different from the emerging caste dynamics of Bengal. The character of Renaissance in Assam was the same like that of Bengal but smaller in dimension. If it was William Carey who had reinvented Bengali language in Srerampore as part of the missionary goal of promoting Christianity; in Assam it were the Baptist missionaries promoting Assamese language for the same missionary objectives from Sivasagar in upper Assam, one prominent Baptist Missionary being Miles Bronsosl. As the emergence of a new elite class in Bengal, in Assam too the Duaria-Baruas (the revenue collectors at the ports and frontier markets) emerged as *the new elites of Assam* gaining authority through economic might, favour of the colonial rulers and exposure to 'modern' education in the colonial city of Calcutta. In the context of the formation of the Assamese *jati*, the Duaria Baruas turned out to be the new protagonists instead of the traditional elites of ethnic Assam. As Tilottoma Misra would observe, "The *dangorias* represented a culture which was more orthodox and conservative than what was known as the *bhadralok* culture of Bengal and Assam in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They (the *dangorias*) clung to their old values and were slow to respond to the new ideas coming in through the western door." (Misra xix-xx) But this western door was not so far off, it was practically the Bengal door. The Duaria-Baruas were the first protagonists of the Assamese colonial Renaissance who learnt, like the enlightened Bengalis of the time, English, Sanskrit, Persian, Bengali and other subjects. Holiram Dehkial Phukon, a Duaria-Barua, with his great proximity to the colonial representatives, was the richest Assamese of lower Assam as the Sirastadar (the chief official in court); his brother, Jagnaram Kharghoria Phukan, who learnt English, Persian, Sanskrit, Urdu and Arabic, was appointed as the superintendent of police. They obtained their education in Calcutta when, to cover the distance of about 1000 kilometers from Guwahati by road it took about three months to reach Calcutta which later got truncated to sixteen days once the steamboat was introduced.

## II

### The Questions of Chastity and the Colonial Juridical Morality

The Renaissance Bengal has not only constructed a class of powerful elites and disseminated new notions of social rules; it has also brought in a new set of moral codes so far not construed as compatible especially to the lived world of ethnic Assam. Two of the significant judicial cases in this respect were the 'Unchastity Case of Kery Kolutani' and the 'Inheritance Case of Aiti Kochuni'. These two keenly contested judicial cases redefined the dimensions of social morality that would subsequently become the dominant codes of social ethics. These cases also institutionalized the

*Dāyabhāga* Hindu Law<sup>3</sup> of inheritance with strong patriarchal bias which was primarily operational in Bengal up till now.

### **The Unchastity Case of Kery Kalitani**

To the colonial Bengal Assam was a land of enigma and exotic promiscuity as well as veritable barbarism. There was a landmark legal battle of Kery Kolutani that drew huge attention in Bengal as a case of unthinkable adultery and dreaded immorality which came to be known as the (in)famous “Unchastity Case” of 1873. Kery Kolutani was a childless widow of the late Moniram Kalita who belonged to the blacksmith community. After she lost her husband she had inherited the share of her deceased husband’s property as per the existing provisions of Hindu Inheritance Law. However, the situation became little complicated when she had taken a lover and gave birth to a child through him. At this the cousins of her deceased husband went to the Munsif Court (session court) seeking forfeiture of her property rights on the grounds of her alleged ‘unchastity’. For the practicing Brahminical values to claim property of her dead husband that too after having maintained a relationship with another man was the ultimate act of irredeemable evil. The high caste Brahmins in Bengal had been throwing even ‘chaste’ brides in the burning pyres primarily to deprive them of any property rights. This case had the potentiality to jeopardise the patriarchal Brahminical strategy to usurp properties from the widows. Speaking on the case, Dolores Chew in her essay, “The Case of the ‘Unchaste’ Widow: Constructing Gender in 19th-Century Bengal (Kery Kolutani V Moniram Kalita Case)” writes that through the medium of legal case in the ‘colonial situation of domination and subordination’ women were put at the ‘intersections of contested space’. Dolores writes, “Their female-ness and sexuality were elements that were debated and constructed by men, both colonizers and colonized, to fit their varied needs.” (Chew 1)

However, the Munsif court at Sibsagar in Assam in 1870 ruled that the parties were entitled to equal share. Regarding Kery’s ‘unchastity’ the Court observed, “Although the defendant has lately taken a paramour, still, when a second marriage is not solemnized, the first cannot be dissolved.” (Dolores Chew 31) But the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, on the appeal of Moniram Kalita’s cousins, decided against Kery and ruled that because of her ‘unchastity’ she had lost her claim on property. She then appealed in the Calcutta High Court. The case eventually went to a full bench which had ruled in her favour<sup>4</sup>. At this the citizens of Bengal were outraged and became so restless that they went to the extent of raising public fund to send the case to the Privy Council in Britain. However, the Privy Council interpreted the *shastras* and ruled in favour of the defendant in 1879. Significantly, the case had caused uproar in the orthodox Bengali society forcing them to reopen all the *shastras* to firmly establish the conventional position of women. But the case did not evoke as much reaction in Assam for it was rather construed as a normal social practice.

### The Case of Aiti Kochuni

Another significant legal battle is that of Musammat Aiti Kochuni vs Aidew Kochuni in 1919. This was also about the legal right of an ‘unchaste’ daughter over the properties of her deceased father and the question of succession under the *Dāyabhaga* Law. Aiti Kochuni was a daughter of Sasadhar Koch. She had eloped with Kheda Koch and stayed together but she had solemnised her marriage only after the death of her father and claimed her right over her father’s property which was contested by the daughters of Sasadhar Koch’s second wife. To the argument of the lower court that the strict application of the Hindu Law to the people of that part of the country (Assam) might lead to injustice, the High court maintained that it must decide according to the *Dāyabhaga* Law and therefore the plaintiff, on account of her ‘unchastity’, forfeited her claim on her father’s property. Subsequently, in the backdrop of the legal case of Nearam Kachari v/s Ardaram Kachari, the Calcutta High Court in 1921 gave a landmark ruling stating:

*The question whether the Hindu law should be applied to the aborigines of Assam came up to this Court in several cases, and it was held that the Bengal School of Hindu Law applied to the people of Assam. (AIR, 1921 Calcutta, 558 (2) in Misra xlviii)*

This judgment caused the subordination of customary laws prevalent among various communities in Assam. They came under new and heavily orthodox legal codes that would turn the intimate social reality and the traditional rights to propriety of the aboriginal women of Assam change forever as legally untenable and even profane.

Quite significantly, during that period in Assam chastity of women came under strict scrutiny turning women into veritable objects to carry the orthodox Brahminical codes of male moral parameters which was the most powerful normative codes prevalent in colonial Bengal more so among the caste Hindus during the long Muslim rule. Though no bride burning was recorded in Assam but the social status, especially of the high caste widows, dramatically changed as the strict modalities of Bengali Brahmin widowhood was systematically imposed on women in Assam including wearing of white sari by a widow instead of colourful *mekhela chadar*, removal of ornaments, imposition of vegetarian food, also cutting of hair etc. This turned out to be acute social tortures on an individual who was used to ethnopolitan cultural life and food. The plight of the high caste widows (Brhamin, Kayastha and Daivajna) became quite acute and became a major social issue. (Guha 19) There has been complete overhauling of her personal life which eventually became the norm by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century even for the non- high caste widows in order to avoid the growing disgrace of social apathy that took its roots in Assamese society. The high caste women were totally subjectivised with the new codes of Brahminical values arrived from Bengal.

However, the practice of hypergamy or supergamy prevalent among the Bengal Brahmins did not take place in case of Assam though polygamy was not uncommon among the natives. It may be noted that when Vidyasagar made a survey of the *kulin* (high caste) polygamy in Hooghly district, the revelations were staggering. Even in 1850 the one hundred thirty kulin Brahmins surveyed had about ten wives each on an average, the highest being 80 number of wives of a fifty five year old Brahmin followed by 75 and 62 number of wives each of two other Brahmins. Dasgupta described this Kulin profligacy in terms of possessing wives not as just polygamy but 'hypergamy'. (Dasgupta 222) Because of the powerful movements initiated against *satti* and for widow remarriage, Dipesh Chakrabarty defined Ram Mohan and Vidyasagar as the ones who could achieve 'modern self' as they could internalize the suffering of the 'female community'. (Chakrabarty 121)

### The Caste Dynamics of Modernism

Ambedkar's views on the seemingly progressive and reformist initiatives of the Renaissance protagonists like Vidyasagar and Ram Mohun Roy are significant. Ambedkar would disagree to confer 'modern selfhood' for such reformist agendas. In his famous undelivered lecture, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) Ambedkar points out that there are distinctions between 'Hindu family reform' and 'social reform'. According to him not the first but the later kind of reform was important for the reorganization and reconstruction of Hindu society. The former involved widow remarriage, abolition of child marriage but the latter was related to the abolition of caste system. He alleged that the high caste intellectuals neither had the courage nor the feel to agitate against caste. Ambedkar also quoted Woomesh Chandra Banerjee, an enlightened 19<sup>th</sup> century figure from Bengal, who had publicly denounced the social reform aiming at women education as a vital condition of India's true emancipation. Even Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a chit pavan Brahmin (a Brahmin superior hierarchy) and the champion of Swaraj, was vehemently opposed to women education, when his compatriots, Mahatma Phule and Jyotiba Phule (Dalit social reformers) relentlessly fought for education for women and the untouchables during the same time. (Ambedkar 212-213) He mentions about the governing ethos of Hindu society and its pedagogy which propagated the ideology, *barnanam brāhmane guru*, i.e., among all the castes only the Brahmins have the warrant to be the teachers/ preceptor. (Ambedkar, 207) The subtle operations of such caste hierarchy and the dominance of caste categories in the discourse of Assamese nationalism too obliquely continued as the fundamental premise in the social and political realms, a legacy that deepened with the germination of modernism in Assam through the colonial Renaissance of Bengal.

The social reform in Assam during the Renaissance was similar in character like that of Bengal. It was essentially a programme for internal correction of Brahmin households without an apology of attempt to address the issues concerning the so called low castes or the other ethnic categories, the *janjatis*. Gunabhiram Barua (1837-1894) was one of the major intellectuals of that time to have been immensely

influenced and fascinated by Ram Mohun and Vidyasagar when he went to Calcutta in 1851 to study in Kolutola School and later to join the Presidency College. He even married a Brahmin widow as per the Brahmo rites after the demise of his first wife in 1870. Their daughter Swarnalata was the first Assamese girl to have been educated in Bethune School in Calcutta. Ironically, despite such progressive developments this was also the time when the Brahminical values were taking roots in Assamese society, resulting in the strong disapproval of Gunabhiram's attempts to give too much education to the girl children.

The upper castes and the Brahmins, who called themselves as the 'important persons of Assam', campaigned along with the missionaries against the 'evil custom' of informal marriages practiced in several communities which was seen as the social customs without having the approval of the *shastras*. The missionary periodical, *Orunodoi* became the major mouthpiece for such 'reformist' discourses. Ironically, the same periodical was also the major platform for the progressive thought of Gunabhiram Barua who has been the most eminent champion of women education and widow remarriage which he used to propagate through his incessant writings and rejoinders in the *Orunodoi*.

In this context Tilottoma Misra makes a significant observation when she argues that the 19<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance group in Bengal inspired the upper caste Assamese literati to take up similar programmes in Assam, but the peculiar nature of the Assamese Hindu society necessitated the adoption of a dualistic position in most cases. There was uncertainty about the actual nature of reform that would suit the Assamese society, and there was also a latent fear of taking up a stand that would break the growing barrier between the Brahmins and the vast majority of the non-Brahmin laity.

Gunabhiram is the representative figure of the Assamese Renaissance, a proverbial Ram Mohun Roy of Assam, a radical in terms of his social commitments to promote widow remarriage and women education, but when it came to several liberating practices prevalent for women among the various ethnic communities of Assam, he had taken rather conservative stances to overlook or ignore them.

Representation of Assamese women as seductresses and promiscuous was the general image that dominated the colonial writings on Assam of that time both in English and Bengali which had an effect of Althusserian 'interpellation' when it came to evolving the self-perception of the Assamese women. Through such writings Assam was effectively orientalist. A.J. Moffatt Mill in his *Report on the Province of Assam* (1854) orientalist Assam as a land of degenerate lot and interpreted local customs as acts of utter depravity. The custom of 'bride price' among the ethnic weddings was described as 'fathers bartering their daughter for financial gain' (Mill 525). The colonial voyeurism on the native cultural manifestations turned into acts of moral evaluation. Such interpretations were so influential that even Holiram Dhekial Phukon in his *Assam Buranji*, written in Bengali, reflecting the Brahminical moral values that got so

deeply ingrained in the intellectuals psyche of that time, gives quite an unceremonious description of Bihu (the spring festival of ethnic Assamese natives). In his otherwise erudite book he had described the female participants in Bihu dance as ‘ordinary women’ and the male participants as ‘lumpens’ (*sadharan mohila* and *lampat*) and the tradition of Bihu dance as *kuriti* (decadent). (Dhekial Phukon 103-104), Sengupta has translated the original Bengali statement of Holiram Dhekial Phukon as ‘licentious orgy’. (Sengupta 293) In the book Dhekiyal Phukan, however, had greatly praised the Brahminical practices and customs that were taking roots in Assamese society. The growing caste consciousness among the emerging new elites was evident when Dhekial Phukon observed that ‘more fortunate an Ahom was, more ignorant was he’. But in the same breath he had praised the Brahmans as learned and the colonial rule as the onset of good governance. (Dhekial Phukon 101)

It may be mentioned that till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the illegitimate children of Brahmin widows were given a social recognition as *Borias*. But with the advent of the ‘modern values’ or the ‘Bengal values’, such practices were seen as immoral. One may note that despite being a Brahmo, Ramkumar Vidyaratna, while describing Assamese society, emphasized more on the higher and the lower castes in Assam and obviously the lower castes were seen as typical representatives of decadent social practices. However, he made some favourable observations about Assamese women which were quite uncommon for a writer from Bengal of that time. There used to be a general perception among the common people from Bengal that the animals like rams and sheep seen grazing in the slopes of the Nilachal Hills of the Kamakhya temple were actually the males from Bengal turned into animals by the power of black magic possessed by the sinister Assamese women. About this Tilottoma Misra writes, “(This) was the figment of the same imagination which represents the women from the colonies as the voluptuous ‘other’ who corrupt the white male.” (Misra lvii).

### III

#### Assam’s Colonial Experience and Epistemic Dislocations

Assam’s experience of colonisation has been paradoxical and ambivalent for it had caused formidable epistemic dislocation of the native consciousness of the land. Interestingly the ordinary natives of Assam were more wary of the Bengali *babus* than the western colonisers. An ordinary Assamese native would encounter a Bengali official as the colonial master directly than a British administrator, therefore, the common perception against the Bengalis led to general antagonism. The natives of Assam felt that all progressive thoughts like ‘women education’, ‘widow remarriage’ etc. came from Bengal but at the same time they also feared that it were the Bengali officials and the *babus* who were instrumental not only in imposing political and economic colonisation but also cultural and linguistic domination. Quite significantly, the British rule in Assam was popularly referred to as the “Bengal Days’ by the commoners as well as the intellectuals of that time. (*Assam Bandhu* Vol 1 (3) in Misra xlv)

In this respect it is important to note that the development of modern Assamese language evolved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Bengal with the active support of the Bengali intelligentsia. S.C. Sengupta in his essay “The Bengalees in Assam in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century” has spoken about how the Ahoms had fortified the western border from any possible invasion from Bengal and also pointed out that not only the Bengalis but also the other communities including the Europeans were also resisted. It may be noted that throughout the discourses of the Assam *buranjis*<sup>5</sup> the term ‘*Bongal*’ was used to primarily refer to the invading Turks since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Ahoms had a great tradition of chronicling events known as the *buranjis*. Several versions of the *buranjis* like the *Deodahi Buranji*, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, *Asom Buranji* and so many other *buranjis* had referred to the Muslim invaders from Bengal as *Bongals*. Significantly, in those ancient chronicles the term was not seen to have been used to refer to the people from Bengal in general. Quite notably, several Brahmin priests were brought to Assam from Nadia in Bengal and were made the chief priests, one being Krishnaram Bhattacharya of Nadia who was made the chief priest of the Kamakhya Temple as the Parbatiya Gohain or the Priest of the Hills, by King Shiva Singha in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>. The Ahoms had welcomed the professionals from the west, which included the craftsman, salt traders, artisans, accountants and others. In fact, the western part of Assam, Kamrup-Kamata, had its border up to Dinajpur in West Bengal where a major military post was set up to foil any attempts of the Turkish invaders who had thoroughly vanquished Bengal as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century. (see Edward Gait, K.L. Barua *et al*) Later, when Rangamati came under the Mughal rule and subsequently to the British rule in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Goalpara became the effective border between Assam and its western neighbour. (Guha 2000)

Nevertheless, the Bengal Renaissance had been influential in shaping the modernist ethos of Assam. Guha in his seminal work, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, has referred to Jagnaram Barooah who was greatly influenced by Ram Mohun Roy and also a group of Assamese youths educated in Calcutta, like Holiram Dhekial Phukon, Jagnaram Barooah, Jaduram Deka Barooah who used to publish progressive letters in Bengali in the newspapers published from Calcutta such as *Samachar Darpan*, *Samachar Chandrika* etc. Holiram Dhekial Phukon wrote the history of Assam, *Assam Buranji*, in Bengali in 1829, also *Kamakhya Yatra Paddhati* (Guide to Kamakhya) in Bengali. Sengupta makes a significant observation that till 1880 there was cordial relationship between the Assamese middle class and the Bengalis, but, referring to W.H. Hunter’s *Statistical Account of Assam* (1879), he writes that the relationship embittered when the Assamese middle class became “conscious of their own language and had to compete with the Bengalis for employment, and (when) the teachers from Bengal made derogatory remarks betraying racial arrogance.” (Sengupta 372) However, there were also a host of eminent Bengali teachers like Chandra Mohan Goswami, Janmejaya Das, Rameswar Sen who had taught Assamese language to some of the iconic figures of Assamese literary history- Laxminath Bezbaroa Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, Padmanath Barua and others (Sengupta 372) In fact, some of the most

significant cultural and literary bodies such as the *Assam Desh Hitoishini Sabha*, the *Jnan Pradayini Sabha*, the *Ryot Sabha* and the like, that had played crucial role in the evolution of the Assamese consciousness and the ethos of modernism, were formed under the influence of Bengal Renaissance. (Sengupta 373)

When Assamese modernism was intrinsically associated with Bengal that had definitely brought fresh energy and ethos to the growth of Assam's intellectual trajectory, the same had also engendered considerable anxiety. This was the time when, especially, the Brahmin widows were subjected to greater social repressions through the propagation of what Tilottoma Misra would call as 'de-Assamization' which included the adoption of the Bengal customs in order to make the widows more pure and sanctified than the women from other communities, in effect, to claim a superior social status for the high castes by way of imposing greater restrictions on their females. Thankfully, this tendency did not take its extreme form to import even the customs of *satti* from Bengal. It may be noted that as per the official statistics of 1815-18, within this three years, there were reported cases of 1528 *satti* (bride burning ritual) in the Calcutta region alone. (Dasgupta 120)

During this period of Bengalisation of social values an interesting division significantly grew among the Brahmins belonging to lower Assam, i.e., Kamrup and also Goalpara and the Brahmins from upper Assam. Quite curiously, the Brahmins in upper Assam were more influenced by Bengal than their counterparts in lower Assam. However, the influence of the orthodox Bengal order among the Brahmins in Assam in general is significant as they had seminal impact in the construction of the social and cultural ethos in the formation of the Assamese as a *jati*, a nation. The division between the two groups of Brahmins, that is the Brahmins from upper Assam and the lower Assam, got intensified following the Raghunandian<sup>8</sup> opinions on the *Smritis* and the Hindu Law Books that were followed by the Hindus in Bengal.

There used to be a custom of *gaa dhan* (bride price) practiced by the Kamrupa Brahmins in lower Assam as the amount to be paid by the groom to his prospective in-laws before getting married to the bride. This was a custom that was disadvantageous for the grooms and was considered a decadent custom by the upper Assam Brahmins as well as by the other educated Brahmins. This was a native custom among the indigenous ethnic communities. The custom obviously put the bride's family fairly at an advantageous position. The custom was practiced in recognition of the value a woman carried in terms of social status and the invaluable role she plays in agrarian economy. Many communities, though the practice would no longer be there, still refer to marrying off a daughter as 'selling off' the bride. In a popular Rajbanshi folk song from lower Assam sung by legendary folk singer Pratima Barau Pandey and Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, where a girl laments for being 'sold to a groom' by her heartless father when she was still young:

*Bapo bhai mor hiyaré chhara,  
becheya khaise mok chototé,  
Jauban dholey mor pubal batashey<sup>9</sup>*

## Conclusion

Despite having propagated emancipatory and progressive values, the impact of the Renaissance of colonial Bengal has been double edged in the context of Assam. Like any Enlightenment Project the Renaissance of colonial Bengal too has been a major metanarrative that has effectively destabilised native order and ethos leading to disruptions and anxieties among the indigenous communities in Assam. Through the rich legacy of ancient and medieval literature, notably the copious and enormous output of the Vaishnavite literature as well as the rich and highly systematic tradition of Ahom Buranjis since the 13th century, Assam can definitely claim more vibrant literary tradition since antiquity than that of Bengal, but when it comes to the literary and cultural sensibilities of what can be termed as ‘modern’, the Bengal Renaissance has a very distinctive impact. The impact of colonial Bengal has been significantly empowering and at the same time this had also engendered deep cultural disquiet. However, the metanarrative of the Bengal Renaissance prevailed in a formidable way and quite powerfully redefined a set of modern ethos but, at the same time, this has also been a cause of effective cultural dislocation of the Assamese self which had resulted in the epistemic anxiety and progressive obfuscation of the historical centrality of the Assamese indigenous self within Assam itself thereby dislodging the vernacular syntaxes of pedagogic and cultural mores. It may be noted that Modernism in Assam has remained a continued legacy leading to the periodic anxieties that Assam as a nation has been subjected to. Modernism, as Madina Tlastanova would point out, has been by default linked to the ‘logic of coloniality’, since modernity is inalienably linked to the hegemony of the ‘west’. These parameters remain valid even in the context of the discursive history of modernism in Assam.

## Notes

1. At the same time, Marx’s description of traditional Indian society as ‘semi-barbarian’ and semi-civilised’, to a large extent, had been a foundational derivative to shape India’s formulation of self-perception. (see Marx’s 1853 essay, “The British Rule in India”)
2. The activities of the Brahmos from Bengal were seen in Sylhet (1862), Cachar (1865) and Sivasagar (1866). Among the eminent converts were Padmahans Goswami and Gunabhiram Barua (Kanailal Chattopadhyay, 1998, 621)
3. The *Dāyabhāga* is a legal treatise written by [Jimūtavāhana](#) which codifies the inheritance law governing the Hindus. The strictly defined legal codes of the Dayabhaga had immense influence in the formulation of Hindu inheritance law in colonial Bengal under the British regime. However, it was gradually replaced by subsequent adoption of the Hindu Succession Act 1956 and its later revisions.
4. Gooroodass Banerjee, an expert counsel who later became a judge in Calcutta High Court,

had pleaded for Kery Kalitani. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in...chapter%207.pdf>

5. Many sporadic *Buranjis* were collected between 1840-1850 by Rev. Nathan Brown of Sibsagar Mission which were later published in serial form in the first Assamese newspaper—the *Orunodoi*, in 1853. The early manuscripts of the Ahom *Buranjis* were compiled and edited by Rev. Nidhi Levi Farewell, the first Assamese convert to Christianity. These *Buranjis* were later edited and compiled in book form from 1930 onwards by the Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti under the guidance of Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan. There were several versions of the *buranjis* called *Tungkhungia Buranji*, *Deodhai Buranji*, *Bahghoria Burha Gonhair Buranji*, *Datiyolia Buranji* (the history of minor chief doms), *Padshah Buranji* (the chronicle on the Delhi Sultanate), *Asom Buranji* by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan (1835), *Tripura Buranji* by Ratna Kandali and Arjun Das Katakya including the *Buranjis* about the kingdoms of Manipur, the Jayantias, Kacharis, Koches, Chutiyas, Mikirs and the like. (see Prodhani, 2019, 36)
6. Krishnaram Bhattacharyya or the Parbatiya Gohain of Kamakhya Temple played a major role in causing a major religious conflicts by instigating the queen Phuleswari Devi to brutally persecute the Vaishnavas resulting in the subsequent fall of the Ahom rule. Senguta writes, “No other Bengali has rendered so much disservice to Assam as was done by Krishnaram” (“Social Transition in Assam”, Sengupta, 2013, 293)
7. As per the official statistics of 1815-18, the incident of Sati was recorded as many as 1,528 in Calcutta region alone when in the other divisions of Dacca, Murshidabad, Patna, Benares and Bareilly divisions the total incidents of Sati were recorded as 837. (see Dasgupta, 2011, 120)
8. Raghunanda was the 16<sup>th</sup> century scholar from Bengal who had composed the *Dāyabhāgatika* considered the best to interpret the best interpretation of *Dāyabhāga* which was followed by Calcutta High Court during the colonial period as the primary base of Hindu law.
9. See *Bhawaiya Gaan* Eds. D.N. Bhakat and Pratima Neogi, p 526.

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## Politics of Recognition and the Ethnic ‘Others’: Revisiting the Gorkhaland and Bodoland Movement

Jhumpa Mukherjee<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Since the last six decades, India has experimented with various territorial and non-territorial measures for accommodation of ethnic demands. Grant of territorial self-rule to an ethnic community in India is usually based on the principle of ethnic majoritarianism as is evident from the multiple experiments of recasting of state territories. The question therefore is: if ethnic majoritarianism is the guiding principle of territorial reorganization what happens to other communities residing in the area since most of the regions are ethnically heterogeneous and the ethnic ‘others’ are considerable in number. The present study seeks to critically examine the politics of recognition within the model of ethno-federal self-rule through two case studies, Gorkhaland movement in West Bengal and Bodoland movement in Assam, the strategies of the state and the Centre as well as the responses of the ‘other’ ethnic communities in the region.*

Territorial claims and contestations by ethnic communities have remained a vibrant discourse within the federal contours of India because of its multi-layered and complex diversity. The Indian state has experimented with different methods of ethnic conflict accommodation which include internal self-determination, territorial autonomy, cultural autonomy, constitutional protection. Various states and sub-states that have resulted out of this process are all based on the rhetoric of ethnic self-determination, whether language, region, tribal affiliations, or a combination thereof. The practise of linking ethnicity and territories is not a simple one size fits all solution. Instead of mitigating conflicts, demarcating a territory for an ethnic group may spark off similar conflicts in the region given the fact that the concept of ethnic majority and minority cannot be so easily compartmentalised. Ethnic minorities produced because of the process have faced exclusion on many counts.<sup>2</sup> Again, the process of

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<sup>2</sup> Despite several constitutional provisions for protection of language rights of minorities, they have been subjected to domination by majorities. For eg, in Assam till 2003, Bodos were forced to study Assamese and not their mother tongue Bodo; in Tripura, KokBorok speakers were forced to learn Bengali since that is the official language of the state, the West Bengal Chief Minister had recently declared Bengali as a compulsory language in schools only to detract later under the face of huge opposition.

territorialisation of ethnicity entails a complex set of factors. As John McGarry and Brendon O'Leary rightly comments that 'exercising the principle of self-determination is only straightforward where there is no large or disgruntled ethnic minority within the relevant region affected by the proposed secession and when the seceding area includes the great majority of those who wish to leave'.<sup>3</sup> As a study in Indian politics, the paper tries to critically assess one, the level of ethnic exclusion that happens as a result of territorial inclusion of dominant but not majority groups through ethno-federal self-rule with reference to two case studies: the Gorkhaland movement in West Bengal and Bodoland movement in Assam; second, the perception of the Union and respective State governments in handling the demands and thirdly, the institutions of self-rule and provisions of shared rule within them and finally how have the 'other' ethnic communities of the region reacted/responded to the territorial measures granted to the 'dominant' (not majority) group.

### **The Macro Story: Ethnicity and Federalism in India Since Independence**

The federal journey of independent India represents a long trajectory of manifold complexities primarily because India's diversity is proverbial, and the country had already witnessed a partition in 1947 on the basis of religion. As a country where people identify themselves with their cultural markers, accommodating all the markers is an upheaval task and many a times the ethnic roots cannot be defined within an earmarked territory because of multi-layered identities.

As the framers started the task of adopting a Constitution of free India, numerous apprehensions were raised as to whether linking of territory with language would lead to balkanization of the country. Various Commissions were set up to identify a plausible way forward. The Dar commission (Linguistic provinces Commission) submitted its report on December 10, 1948, stating, "linguistic homogeneity in the formation of new provinces is certainly attainable within certain limits but only at the cost of creating a fresh minority problem".<sup>4</sup> Along similar lines, The State Reorganization Commission (SRC) in its Report in 1955 reiterated that People's wishes must be taken into consideration. But that does not mean people would have the unconditional right to self-determination. It held the view that self-determination as principle of reorganisation should be accepted in rarest of the rare circumstances, that too after taking due cognizance to the question of "(i) human and material resources of the area claiming statehood; (ii) the wishes of the substantial minorities; (iii) the essential requirements of the Indian constitution; and (iv) the larger national interest."<sup>5</sup> The Commission recommended formation of linguistic provinces but within certain

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<sup>3</sup> John McGarry and Brendon O'Leary, *Eliminating and Managing Ethnic Differences* in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds.), *Ethnicity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996. p. 335

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission, 1948, In B.Shiva Rao, (ed.), *The Framing of India's Constitution , Select Documents*, Vol. 4, Universal Law Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 2004, p. 473.

<sup>5</sup> SRC Report, Para 228.

considerations. The subsequent years witnessed reorganization of Indian federation into sub federal units based on language, tribe, ethnicity. There is a rich scholarship on the role of the Indian state to accommodate various ethno-regional claims spelling the success of the Indian state (Adeney, 2007a; Adeney, 2017b; Bhattacharyya, 2001a; Bhattacharyya 2017b; Bhattacharyya 2018c; Brass 1991; Mitra and Singh 2009; Mukherjee 2014a; Mukherjee 2017 b; Mukherjee 2018 c; Tillin 2013) While mainstream literature on political accommodation speak about the success stories of accommodating conflicts, but there are some cases where accommodation has not served its purpose. I would refer to two such regions which has witnessed tension and violence after the process of political accommodation; namely, Gorkhaland in West Bengal and Bodoland in Assam. Existing scholarship on the Gorkhaland movement has identified multiple reasons for the movement (Subba 1992; Dasgupta 1998; Samanta 2000; Sarkar 2013; Mukherjee 2015). There is equally a growing scholarship on Assam and the ethnic tensions brewing in the region (Baruah 2005a; Baruah 2009 b; Bezbaruah 1998; Bhaumik 2009; Hausing 2014; Bhattacharyya, Hausing and Mukherjee 2017; Bhattacharyya & Mukherjee 2018) But then the existing scholarship has primarily been concerned with the impact of such territorial reconfiguration, violence in the region, the insurgency problem, asymmetrical federalism in operation. It is imperative to note that there is also the need to locate the politics of recognition of the 'others' since the concept of majority and minority is misleading in the two regions of the study. The States Reorganization Commission was well aware of the fact that any territorial reconfiguration would create substantial minorities and hence the SRC (1955) (Vol. IV) provides a section titled 'Safeguards for linguistic groups' (para 757 -776, & 778-785) which advised the Government of India to adopt in consultation with the State Governments a clear code 'to govern the use of different languages at different levels of state administration and take steps, under Article 347, to ensure that the code is followed'. Is it followed? Given the political principle of majoritarianism reigning supreme in government and administration, such safeguards are never salient as can be seen in the very recent notification of the Government of West Bengal to make Bengali a compulsory language in all districts, which was later withdrawn under protest from the Gorkhas. For the regional minorities both the territorial and nonterritorial solutions have proved to be faulty. The majority who control the government can easily ride roughshod over the concerns of the minorities because of an inappropriate power sharing mechanism. Conventional writings have hardly addressed this gap of locating the others and their reactions. The Indian state can hardly afford to ignore them given the density of population; minorities are often considerable in number unlike the sparsely populated western multicultural countries. The paper seeks to show that conventional mechanism of conceding self-rule to the dominant group (not majority) without any power sharing with the considerable 'others' is unworkable in the present times since ethnic self-rule is also connected with controlling of resources which the 'others' are equally determined to wrest their due share of resources. The article seeks to critically examine the two movements from the perspective of the 'others', the so-called minority communities.

**Ethnic Mobilisation in West Bengal: The Gorkhaland Movement and its Trajectories**

West Bengal, though a relatively peaceful state, has witnessed sometimes sporadic and sometimes persistent spells of ethnic mobilisation like the Gorkhaland movement and the Kamtapuri movement. Both these movements though have originated in north Bengal, yet are different in terms of actors, issues, strategies but converge on the need for territorial autonomy for the communities. It is pertinent to give a brief backdrop of the Gorkhaland movement to contextualise the region, people and the rationality of the exercise of self-rule. Gorkhaland, the name given to the area around Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong in West Bengal, is the movement launched by the Gorkhas to form a separate state of their own. Who are the Gorkhas or Gurkhas? According to the Anthropological Survey of India the term Gorkha is a blanket term which includes communities of Nepal or who originally came to India from Nepal. The Gorkhas are subdivided into numerous castes or Janjatis like *Chettri, Rai, Tamang, Thami, Bhujel, Pradhan, Damal, Gurung, Yakha, Kami, Mangar, Sarki, Sunwar, Thakuri, Sherpa, Limbu*. Not all are recognised as ST and not all of them share the same vision of self-rule as we shall see later in the discussion. As per the census of 2011, the total population of Darjeeling district is 1,846,823. Majority are Nepali speakers. Their language, very different from the language of the plainsmen, was one of the strong factors behind the emergence of the Gorkha ethnic identity. The leaders of the movement are seeking a separate state for these people, others forcibly being made a part of the movement with no choice being available to them. In fact, the Lepchas have been expressing their discontent of being skilfully manoeuvred by the Gorkhaland champions. Racially all of them belong to the same Mongoloid stock. They exhibit the same physical features. In terms of language also, the language of the Lepchas, Bhutias and various ethnic groups of the Nepalis, belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. However, the moot question is what happens to other ethnic communities residing in the territorial areas demanded by the Gorkhas since the Gorkhas though a dominant group but do not constitute a numerical majority in the demanded region. Would it not lead to similar claims by other ethnic communities? It should be noted that a similar recognition of claim of the Bodos in 2003 has led to severe bloodbath between the Bodos and non Bodos (Adivasis, Rajbongshis, Rabhas, Mishings) and the creation of Bodoland Territorial Council instead of a possible solution led to exacerbation of conflicts. Hence recognition of ethnic claims and its syncing with territory remains to be a problematic in the Gorkhaland context too. Historical evidence suggests that the Gorkha community had demanded a separate state for themselves as early as 1907 when the Hillmen's Association (Hillmen in 1907 included the Lepchas and Bhutias too) presented a memorandum to the then British government for the formation of a separate administrative unit comprising of Darjeeling and Dooars. In the post- independence period, autonomy movement started when the States Reorganization Commission failed to recognize the autonomy of the Gorkhas. Post- independence Gorkhas were the only community in the north east left out during the reorganization of States even though they fulfilled the entire

criterion.<sup>6</sup>The succeeding years witnessed movements for the recognition of Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution as well as for the autonomous status of Darjeeling within the province of West Bengal. In 1982 the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) was formed to pursue the longcherished goal of a separate Gorkha homeland. The fundamental rationale behind this demand was the expulsion of Nepali citizens from Meghalaya, the protest by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) over illegal entry of Nepalese in Assam, protest by All Meghalaya Khasi Students' Union (AMKSU) for deportation of foreigners from Meghalaya, refusal of Sikkim and West Bengal governments to accommodate them. Hence the Nepalese of Darjeeling took up the cause of a separate homeland for themselves. The GNLF led by the charismatic leadership of Subhas Ghisingh created a ray of hope in the minds of the Gorkhas in Darjeeling that Darjeeling might have a separate entity within the geographical map of India. The state of West Bengal was in no mood to bow down to Ghisingh's demands. The government responded by saying that "West Bengal is as much a homeland for the Nepali speaking population living here as it is for other communities---Nepalese, with their distinct language, look, customs and habits are an integral part of the cultural landscape of the State of ours".<sup>7</sup>

Dissatisfied with the attitude of the State government, the GNLF revised its earlier position and started the second phase of agitation by demanding the status of separate statehood for Gorkhaland within the framework of the Constitution of India. The years since the 1980s witnessed violent agitation by the GNLF for the recognition of their claims. However, the movement was branded as anti-national by the Left Front Government of West Bengal. The agitation came to an end with the signing of a tripartite agreement between the Union Government, GNLF and the West Bengal government for the formation of an autonomous council.

## **Institutional Responses of the State towards the Gorkhaland Movement**

### **Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC)**

In a bid to reach a settlement and end the disturbances in the Hills, a tripartite agreement was signed in 1988 between the Union Government; GNLF led by Subhas Ghisinghand the West Bengal government called the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council Agreement. Interestingly the Memorandum of Settlement provided that, "in the overall national interest and in response to the Prime Minister's call, the GNLF agreed to drop the demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland".<sup>8</sup>In addition, a pact on citizenship and language was signed between Ghisingh, Somaiah (Centre's representative) in the

<sup>6</sup> Priyadarshini Shrestha, Separation for Integration—Status of Stateless minorities in a multicultural democracy: A case study of the Indian Gorkhas, University of Fribourg, Aug 28, 2015,

<sup>7</sup> Cited in SnehamoyChaklader, Sub-Regional movements in India, with special reference to Bodoland and Gorkhaland, K.P.Bagchi and Company, Kolkata , 2004, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in PrabhatDatta, Regionalisation of Indian Politics, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1993, p. 158

presence the then Home Minister Buta Singh in New Delhi. As per the notification, announced by the Centre, the Act recognizes “Gorkhas and not Gorkhals or Nepalis as Indian citizens according to Article V of the Indian Constitution”<sup>9</sup> As Subba rightly notes that this insertion has led to a sense of frustration among the Nepalis of the Hills of Darjeeling and in India that through this notification, the Union Government has compelled every Gorkhali or Nepali to call himself or herself a Gorkha.<sup>10</sup>

The Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) was formed to ensure social, educational, economic and cultural advancement of the Hill areas of Darjeeling district. The Hill Council was set up under the State of West Bengal Act. It provided for a General Council consisting of 42 members of whom two-thirds are elected and one-third nominated by the state government. The Act further stated that “the Government shall provide for the due representation of the non- Nepali communities like the Bhutias and Lepchas while nominating the members”. The DHGC was designed as a sub-federal arrangement under the state government towards peaceful conciliation of the long-standing demands of the hill people. The Council failed to bring about desired development owing to structural problems and excessive control of the state government coupled with lack of funds. Subhas Ghisingh then took up the cause of demanding Sixth Schedule status for Darjeeling along the lines of Autonomous District Councils in the North east which not only enjoyed tribal self-government for distinct communities but also more executive, legislative and financial autonomy. In 2005, a tripartite Memorandum of Settlement was signed in New Delhi in 2005, between the Union Government (Congress led UPA with Dr. Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister), West Bengal Government (Left Front Government with Buddhadeb Bhattacharya as Chief Minister) and the GNLFC (Subhas Ghisingh) to initiate the process of according Sixth Schedule status to the DGHC. Under the Sixth Schedule, 6 tribes---the Bhutias, Lepchas, Sherpas, Yolmos, Tamangs and Limbus will have greater representation than the 70% non-tribal population. The Memorandum stated that “The objectives of this agreement are to replace the existing DGHC by an autonomous self-governing council to be known as Gorkha Hill Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution so as to fulfil economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the hill people and to speed up the infrastructure development in the hill areas”. However, not much happened.

The subsequent years witnessed the Hill Council becoming a toothless tiger and the hills receiving stagnancy in terms of development. All the declarations failed to placate the Gorkhas. Malfunctioning of the Hill Council, coupled with undermining of democratic processes and Ghisingh’s apathy towards securing a separate homeland for the Gorkhas recrystallised the demand for Gorkhaland under the new leadership of Bimal Gurung led Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM). It was the call for a separate

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<sup>9</sup> T.B.Subba, *Ethnicity, State and Development, A Case Study of the Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, p. 166

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

state for the Gorkhas giving them a separate ethnic identity in India. The BJP which was gradually gaining momentum, and which had already created the three states of Uttarakhand (out of Uttar Pradesh), Jharkhand (bifurcated from Bihar) and Chattisgarh (out of Madhya Pradesh) in 2000 when it was in power was not against the proposal of formation of new states rather the party was raising the slogan of small is beautiful and was already supporting the demand for Telangana. The BJP hoped to ally the GJMM to gain entry into West Bengal. L.K.Advani, conceded to the idea of Gorkhaland and Jaswant Singh was fielded as the GJM-backed BJP candidate from Darjeeling. However, the 2009 BJP selection manifesto included the BJP's support for Gorkhaland, "We will sympathetically examine and appropriately consider the long pending demands of the Gorkhas, the Adivasis and other people of Darjeeling district and Dooars region." The GJMM lent its support to the BJP candidate in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections in the hope of a reorganisation of state boundary to create Gorkhaland. Though the BJP won in the hills, but it lost the Lok Sabha elections and remained in the opposition. In 2014, the BJP expressly stated, "BJP reiterates that it will sympathetically examine and appropriately consider the long pending demands of the Gorkhas, the Adivasis and other people of Darjeeling district and the Dooars region; of the Kamtapuri, Rajbongshi and other people of North Bengal". However, the BJP though it formed the Government and won from the Hills did not take any initiative to go back to its electoral promise. The 2019 Manifesto of the BJP was yet another photocopy of its earlier promise in a different language, "it would find a permanent political solution to the pending issues in the Darjeeling Hills, Siliguri, Terai and Dooars and recognise 11 Indian Gorkha sub communities as ST.

Since 2009, the Gorkhaland movement gathered new momentum under the leadership of Bimal Gurung who adopted a non-violent form of protest by refusing to pay taxes to the government due on electricity and phone bills, changing vehicle numbers from WB to GL (signifying Gorkhaland). The TMC led government kept its promise of an autonomous arrangement for the Gorkhas and the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration was born.

### **Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA)**

A tripartite agreement between the central government (Congress led UPA), state government (TMC) and GJMM was signed on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2011 for the establishment of a Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) with the objective of establishing an autonomous self-governing body to administer the region so that the socio-economic, infrastructural, educational, cultural and linguistic development is expedited and the ethnic identity of Gorkha established. The GTA was designed to represent the ethnic, linguistic and developmental concerns of the Gorkhas within a democratic framework. From the beginning, the Act provided that the body should be established by direct election to root out anti-democratic forces.

The GTA Council is composed of 50 members, 45 elected and 5 nominated by the Governor to give representation to members of SC, ST, women and minority communities. The Act is not clear about which minority communities it is addressing; neither does the Act provide any protection for the non Gorkha communities in the GTA region. The Act also does not provide for legislative powers to the GTA but confers the powers to frame rules/ regulations under the State Acts to control regulate and administer the 59 departments including education and agriculture, compared to the Gorkha Hill Council's authority over 19 departments. The GHC also lacked financial autonomy since it was vested with the District Magistrate and in Calcutta with the state government.

In the first elections to the GTA Council/Sabha held in 2012 the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) won all 45 seats. Though 5 seats are reserved for minorities who are nominated by the Governor, it goes without saying that 5 nominated members cannot represent the cause of considerable number of Lepchas, Bhutias, Tamangs, Sherpas, Biharis, Adivasis residing in the region. Again, the Sherpas, Bhutias Lepchas and other ethnic communities do not share the Gorkhas' vision of self-rule.<sup>11</sup>

### **The GTA Model: Inclusionary or Exclusionary?**

It should be noted that GTA has been created keeping in mind the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution which provides for territorial self-rule to tribal communities in North east India. The Fifth and Sixth Schedules are meant for administration of predominantly tribal areas or scheduled areas under Article 244 of the Constitution. It provides administrative autonomy with the objective of preservation of the tribals' culture and protection from exploitation at the hands of outsiders. The Fifth Schedule covers tribal areas of nine states, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh. The Sixth Schedule is applicable to the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. The areas are governed by Autonomous District Councils, which enjoys executive, legislative and judicial powers. The ADCs are empowered to make laws on land, forest, water, village or town administration, marriage, divorce, inheritance of property, social customs and so on. One of the main criteria to grant Sixth Schedule status to an area is that the autonomous tribe should form a majority in the area. However, if we look into the 2001 census of the Darjeeling region the numbers do not give the Gorkhas the right to self-rule under Sixth Schedule because they might be the dominant ethnic group but not the majority since there are other ethnic communities (not STs) who make up 65 % of the population. Tribal population in the Darjeeling Gorkha Autonomous Hill Council area is only 35 % as seen in the following table. The rest are Adivasis (20%), Bengalees (15%), Rajbongshis (25%), Totos, Mech and others (5%).<sup>12</sup> The objective of taking into consideration 2001 census for this study is because GTA was created based on the 2001 census.

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<sup>11</sup> The Wire, Politics, 5 July, 2017

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

**Table 1: Survey Report on Tribal Dominated Mouzas under Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council based on 2001 Census**

Name	Total Mouza	Total Population	ST population	%ST	Tamang	Limbu	Total ST	%ST
Darjeeling		1609172	204167	12.69				
<b>Rural areas</b>								
darjPulBazar	45	115837	8973	7.75	19387	16704	45065	38.9
Rangli Ranigiot	29	64349	5019	7.81	18974	7439	31434	53.52
JoreBungalow	47	100724	6945	6.9	23669	11584	42253	38.51
Kurseong	65	85867	7597	8.85	15122	4782	26725	34.68
Mirik	21	42237	3136	7.42	7234	5413	15783	35.61
KPGI	45	67680	11878	17.55	12362	5247	29487	35.48
KPGII	33	60263	14835	24.62	9461	5522	29818	48.13
Gorubathan	27	54279	5880	10.83	12703	6343	24976	39.77
Total in Rural areas DGHC	312	591236	64263	11.46	118912	63134	245541	41.53
<b>Urban Areas</b>	No. of Wards							
Darjeeling	32	107197	12747	11.9	3850	1607	18204	16.1
Kurseong	21	40019	2304	5.07	1400	600	4304	10.75
KPG	23	42998	5421	12.6	1505	645	7571	17.6
Mirik	9	9141	303	3.31	320	138	761	8.32
Grand Total in DGHC area	85	790591	85038	10.88	125987	66124	276381	35

Source: District Welfare Office, Backward Classes Welfare Dept. DGHC, Darjeeling.

### Accommodation of Non Gorkhas and the Logic of Development Boards for Minorities in Darjeeling

The hills of West Bengal are rich in ethnicities. And while Gorkhas are the main group, they aren't the only one. Hence Development Boards have been created by the present Trinamool Congress ruled West Bengal government to look into the developmental needs of the ethnic minorities as well as make them partners in the development process. It is pertinent to mention that one of the objectives of the formation of GTA was fulfilment of the development needs of the region. Given the recent occurrences, the TMC which does not enjoy a friendly disposition with the GJMM has tried to assuage the other tribal communities through the creation of these Development Boards since 2015. In 2018, a total of 16 development boards have been formed as the following table shows. While the first 15 boards have been formed on ethnic line, the last one is based on geography. These Development Boards have accentuated the polarisation of the Hill communities into 2 groups, one, who are the holders of the Boards as well as enlisted in tribal list (dominant elite) and the other,

who are denied such representation. It is interesting to note that way back in 1907, the popular slogan which united the hill communities was “*Nepali, Bhutia, Lapche, Lamisabai Gorkhale*” is meaningless today in the face of such polarisation. Today Lepchas, Bhutias, Dukpas, Yolmos share their historical linkage with Tibet and not Nepal and hence do not consider themselves to be a part of Gorkha identity nor are their interest being served through the GTA.

**Table 2: Development Boards**

Sl. No.	Name of Board	Year of Est.	Created Under
1	Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board	2013	Backward Classes Welfare Dept.
2	Tamang Development & Cultural Board	2014	Tribal Development Dept.
3	Sherpa Cultural Board	2015	Tribal Development Dept.
4	Bhutia Development Board	2015	Tribal Development Dept.
5	Khambu Rai Development Board	2016	Backward Classes Welfare Dept.
6	Mangar Development Board	2015	Backward Classes Welfare Dept.
7	Limbu Development Board	2016	Tribal Development Dept.
8	Pahadia Minority Development & Cul. Board	2017	Minority Affairs & Madrassa Education Dept.
9	Gurung Development & Cultural Board	2017	Backward Classes Welfare Dept
10	Kami Development & Cultural Board	2016	Backward Classes Welfare Dept
11	Khas Development & Cultural Board	2017	North Bengal Development dept.
12	Sarki Development & Cultural Board	2016	Backward Classes Welfare Dept
13	Bhujel Development & Cultural Board	2016	Backward Classes Welfare Dept
14	Newar Development & Cultural Board	2016	Backward Classes Welfare Dept
15	Damai development & Cultural Board	2016	Backward Classes Welfare Dept
16	Terai, Dooars, Siliguri Development & Cultural Board	2018	Backward Classes Welfare Dept

Source: <https://thedarjeelingchronicle.com/development-board-implications/> accessed on 18/10/2019

The 2016 election Manifesto of the TMC explicitly mentions about separate Boards for welfare and development of tribes like Lepcha, Tamang Sherpa, Bhutia, Limbar and Mangar have been created for taking care of the tribes housing, educational and cultural activities and holistic development through various programmes but the manifesto is silent on the demands of the Gorkhas or for that matter any resolution of their demands.

Moreover these Boards have led to internal strife among the Lepchas, Tamangs, Bhutias and Sherpas and the Gorkha leadership of GJMM. The Lepcha community is headed by two organizations, the Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association (ILTA) and the All India Lepcha Association (AILA). These two associations of the Lepchas owe their

allegiance and affiliation to two different parties, the ILTA to the TMC and runs the Lepcha Development Board set up by the state government and AILA to GJM and is pro GTA. Similarly, the Tamangs are represented by 2 bodies, Tamang Buddhist Ghedong Association (TBGA) and the Akhil Bharatiya Tamang Buddhist Association (ABTBA). The ABTBA is pro GJM and the other is pro TMC. Thus, Development Boards set up for minority development have pitted the Gorkhas against non Gorkhas and sometimes the Gorkhas and other janjatis. These boards being funded by the ruling TMC and enjoying the patronage of the Chief Minister has become the bone of contention for the GTA. Again, the Development Boards though have been set up under the GTA area receive instructions and financial assistance from the state government.

The Development Boards have been set up to bring in cultural, infrastructural, economic development for the different ethnic communities. Unfortunately, they neither have cultural, political or economic autonomy and are dependent on the state government for funds. Though these boards have come up in the GTA area yet the GTA does not have any control over them. Moreover, the members of these Boards are nominated by the Government of West Bengal and can be removed by them, thus making them a puppet at the hands of the State Government. The fact, therefore, remains that despite so many territorial and autonomous arrangements for the ethnic minorities in Darjeeling, they are not included into the design of development. The politics of recognition is more a politics of divide and rule for the hill communities leading to greater social exclusion than inclusion.

### **The Case of Bodoland in Assam**

The Bodoland case study seeks to uncover the complex politics of ethnicity and territory in the Bodoland region in Assam. The Bodoland movement today represents a bitter cocktail of ethnic and economic issues in a highly complicated multicultural environment where ethnic self-rule, instead of becoming a conflict resolution mechanism has exacerbated violence. What is Bodoland and who are the Bodos? Today the Bodos are the Plain Tribes of Assam comprising 13.7 per cent of the total population of Assam, and 31 per cent in the BTC area (2001 census). The Bodos are not a homogeneous community linguistically speaking; there were as many as 18 branches of the language such as Kachari, Meech, Dimasa, Koch, Garo, Tripuris, Reangs, Jamatia and Rabha.<sup>13</sup> The four districts in Assam's northeast constitute the Bodo Autonomous Districts, namely, Kokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri and Baksa (Table 3). The Bodos comprise 30% of the population of the BTC districts. The remaining 70% comprises of Muslims, Adivasis Koch Rajbongshis and people of other non-Bodo communities (Table 4).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> S. Chakladar *Sub-Regional Movements in India With Special Reference to Bodoland and Gorkhaland*. K.P. Bagchi, Kolkata.

<sup>14</sup> The Santhals though an ethnic tribe are enumerated as scheduled castes in Kokrajhar district and other BTAD districts

**Table 3: Scheduled Tribe Population in Bodo Territorial Area Districts**

DISTRICTS	ST* POPULATION	PERCENTAGE
KOKRAJHAR	278665	31.41
BAKSHA	331007	34.84
CHIRANG	178688	37.06
UDALGURI	267372	32.15

Source: Census of India 2011. \* ST here refers to the Bodos; the proportion of non-Bodo ST population is very small. The Santhals (sizeable in number in the Bodoland areas in Assam) are not recognized as ST in Assam although they are considered as ST elsewhere in India.

**Table 4: Non Bodo Communities in BTAD Areas**

NON BODO COMMUNITIES	PERCENTAGE
Bengali (Muslims)	19
Adivasi (Santhals and Kuruk)	18
Koch Rajbongshis	16
Others (Bengali Hindus, Nepalis and Rabhas)	15

Source: District Report (2010), O K Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati.

### The Trajectories of the Bodoland Movement

The genesis of the Bodo identity articulation can be traced quite early to the memorandum submitted by the All Assam Kachari Association to the Simon Commission in 1929 demanding separate representation, reservation in education and appointment for the Bodo community (Mahanta 2013: 50). In the post-independence period the construction of a distinct Bodo identity coincided with the linguistic movement going elsewhere in the country wherein the Bodo Sahitya Sabha in 1952 spearheaded a cultural movement for the protection of the Bodo language. The BSS resented the imposition of Assamese on the Bodos and criticized the Official Language policy of the Government of Assam. Till 1967 the Bodo movement was completely peaceful and used democratic methods to create Bodo consciousness centering around the twin concerns of language and script. However, in the wake of reorganization of Assam and the subsequent creation of tribal states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya, the erstwhile cultural demand gave way to the demand for creation of an Autonomous Region and the formation of Udayachal by the Plains Tribal Council of Assam. It is during this period that the Bodo movement assumed a change of guard with the leadership passing off to the dynamic All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) which shed off the earlier democratic tactics and adopted a militant strategy to pursue the goal of a separate state of Bodoland and conferment of the Sixth Schedule status on the Bodo-Kacharis of Karbi Anglong. The subsequent years saw Assam rocked in bandhs, roads and rail blockades, assassinations, kidnapping, abduction and inhuman violence. Concerned over the growing unrest in the state leading to the loss of several million lives in the clashes, the Central Government appointed a Committee under the chairmanship of

Bhupinder Singh (1991) to make recommendations as to the autonomy, legislative, financial and administrative arrangement in the area. The Committee endorsed the fact that the Assamese society being essentially multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi religious, special measures should be taken to maintain the distinctiveness of the diverse identities. The Union government wanting to reign in militancy dwelled upon conceding self-rule to the Bodos. That seemed at variance with the true spirit of the Singh Committee which recommended in favour of accommodating the 'diverse identities' and not exclusively the Bodos. The government not reading between the lines entered into a tripartite agreement between the Central Government, the Assam Government and the Bodo leadership, in which the non-Bodos were not a party, and signed three ethnic peace accords --- one in 1993, the other in 2003, and the latest in 2020 the sole principle being political recognition of the ethnic (minority but dominant) identity of the Bodos. Surprisingly, the two accords and the subsequent constitutional amendment were exclusionary in nature.

Till the 1990s the Bodo organizations resorted to selective violence to get their due share in the political process. However, the 1993 accord failed to satisfy them and the next couple of years saw militant bloodbath by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT) which saw the failure of conventional associations and groups to wrest power exclusively for the Bodos and the changing demography of the region wherein the ethnic rulers (Bodos) were being transformed into a minority group in relation to the Adivasis, Mishings, Rabhas and the immigrant Muslims. The new leadership believing in only militant methods restarted the movement for an exclusive Bodo 'homeland' and resorted to ethnic cleansing. Because of the region's changing demography, persistent Bodo homeland demand and organized discrimination against the non Bodos, a few non-Bodo organizations have started agitational programmes. Mention may be made of the *Sanmilita Janagosthiya Sangram Samithi* (SJSS: United Ethnic People's Struggle Committee), an alliance of 20 non-Bodo organizations. They are demanding a Scheduled Tribes status for the Koch-Rajbongshis and the Adivasis which the Bodo leadership is in no mood to relent. The non bodos have also mobilized themselves and intensified their struggle by launching another organization *Ana Bodo Surakhya Samity* (ABSS: non-Bodo Protection Forum). Interestingly the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) which had in the 1990s supported the formation of BTC is today supporting the Non Bodo forum, thus reflecting that organizational support to a cause is transient and depends on the dynamics of space and time. The agitation by the various non-Bodo organizations must be seen as a natural fallout of the policy of ethnic self-rule which has created new complexities owing to demographic changes in recent decades. The non-Bodo organizations are today more numerous and quite powerful having access to arms and ammunitions to counter the Bodo organizations and are ready to wrest their due share of resources. The Bodo movement thus brings to the fore the multiethnic, multi linguistic and complex nature of the region and the bitter side of granting ethnic self-rule escalating into severe violence and bloodbath. It has raised questions as to

whether ethnic self-rule in a highly diverse society as of the North east can serve as a permanent and viable model of conflict resolution.

### **Institutional Responses of the State Towards the Bodoland Movement Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC)**

#### **Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC)**

The Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) was formed under the Accord signed on 20 February 1993 between the State Government, All Bodo Students' Union, Bodo Peoples' Action Committee. The primary objective was to accord recognition and autonomy through an administrative arrangement designed to further social, economic, educational and cultural advancement within a democratic framework; to take steps to protect the demographic complexion of the areas falling within its jurisdiction; use of Bodo language as medium of official correspondence within the BAC area. The Bodo Accord, however, solved neither the aspirations of the Bodos nor tried to address the complex multicultural multi layered demography of the region. The agreement favoured domination of the State government on the Bodos in the sense that the whole arrangement was provided for under the State Law. The failure of the BAC led the Bodo leaders to demand anew the formation of a separate state of Bodoland. After repeated talks and intense militancy, it was decided that a new political structure will be provided in the form of Bodoland Territorial Council and the BTC would be given special status under the Sixth Schedule under the Constitution.

#### **Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)**

On February 10, 2003, the Government of India, Bodo Liberation Tigers (was banned by the Union Government) on behalf of Bodos, State of Assam signed the new Bodo Accord for the creation of a 'Bodoland Territorial Council' (BTC) under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The objectives of the agreement are: to create an autonomous self-governing body to be known as Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) within the State of Assam; to provide constitutional protection under Sixth Schedule to the said Autonomous Body; to fulfil economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and the preservation of land-rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos; non-tribals are not disadvantaged in relation to the rights enjoyed by them at the commencement of BTC and their rights and privileges including land rights are fully protected; the inclusion of Bodo Language in Devanagiri Script in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. Bodo language shall be the official language of BTC subject to the condition that Assamese and English shall also continue to be used for official purpose. With the passage of the 100th Constitution Amendment Act, 2003 the Bodo language has got constitutional recognition to be placed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution.

According to Clause 4.2 of the Accord: A provision will be made in para 2(1) of the Sixth Schedule for increasing the number of members for Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) up to 46, out of which 30 will be reserved for Scheduled Tribes (read the Bodos), 5 for non-tribal communities, 5 open for all communities and 6 to be nominated by Governor of Assam from the unrepresented communities for BTC area of which at least two should be women. Following the tripartite ethnic peace accord in 2003 and the amendment, accordingly, of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution the same year, the BTC was conceded. The BTC comprises of 46 seats. About two-thirds of the seats (30 out of 40) out of the total 46 were (over-) reserved for the Bodos, leaving the majority (of about more than 70 per cent) of other ethnic groups (including tribes such as the Santhals), politically marginalized and vulnerable. The ethnic minority status of the Bodos within the territorial area of the BTC was compensated for by an assured political majority in the council. Since then inter-ethnic conflicts are common resulting often in ethnic cleansing, persistent violence and deprivation of the non-Bodos.

### **Bodoland Territorial Region Accord 2020**

Without trying to ameliorate the cause of the 'others' in the region, the BJP government on January 27, 2020 signed the third Bodo Accord with the Government of Assam and four factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) (NDFB-Progressive (NDFB-P), NDFB-RanjanDaimary (NDFB-RD), NDFB-DhirendraBoro (NDFB-DB) and NDFB-Saoraigwra (NDFB-S, formerly NDFB-Songbijit)) and ABSU. It was a tripartite accord aimed at quelling the Bodo homeland demand and curb violence in the area. The Accord is not just for the enlargement of autonomy for the Bodos but is also a settlement agreement with the NDFB wherein it has been decided that the Government of Assam will withdraw the criminal cases register red against members of the NDFB factions for non-heinous crimes. All NDFB factions will have to abjure the path of violence, surrender their weapons, and disband their armed organizations within one month of signing of the agreement. The existing Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) shall be renamed as 'Bodoland Territorial Region'. The Accord states that a Commission will be set up to examine the feasibility of inclusion of villages contiguous to BTAD and having majority tribal population. The same Commission will also examine the feasibility of exclusion of villages contiguous to BTAD which are contiguous to the non-Sixth Schedule areas and having majority non-tribal population. The Accord explicitly provides for certain economic, political and cultural benefits to the Bodo groups. For the Bodos settled outside Bodoland Territorial Region, the State government will set up a Bodo-Kachari Welfare Council for focused development of the Bodo villages there. The Bodo-Kacharis living in KarbiAnglong and Dima Hasao districts will be included in the ST (Hills) in a time bound manner. While the Accord provides for protection and promotion of interests of the Bodos in and out of Assam, it is strangely silent on the protection of non Bodos who comprise the majority.

### **Logic of Recognition of the Bodos vis-à-vis the ‘Ethnic Others’**

All the three Accords are pointer to the strange silence of New Delhi as well as the State government towards the cause of the ethnic ‘others’ in the region. This is quite contradictory to Gorkhaland where the State Government has tried to assuage the fears of the non Gorkhas by giving them some degree of autonomy in the form of specific Development Boards. This non recognition of non-Bodo interests in Bodoland by both the State and the central government has given rise to a politics of ‘ethnic outbidding’ at the local level. While the Bodos claim that the area under their jurisdiction is their homeland, the other communities such as the Santhals, the Bengali Muslims and some small groups of (non-Bodo) ST people living within the same jurisdiction also claim it as their homeland. If being an ethnic majority in a particular region is a marker for the right to self-rule, the demographic numbers do not give the Bodos any claim vis-a-vis the combined others to justify their superior hegemonic status in the region (Table3). The complexities are also reflected in the electoral politics in the BTA region.

### **The Electoral Mandate: The Rising Voices of ‘Others’**

The BTR region constitutes a very complicated demography. As already stated above, Bodos comprise 30percent of the total population and the rest non Bodos. Only getting the Bodo votes isn’t enough for any party. Elections have been held since 2005. The Bodo People’s Front (BPF), the main representative of the Bodo interests, has been controlling the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) since the first election held in 2005 though the seat share has been gradually eroding with every election. While elections were held for 40 seats, the BPF won 33 in 2005, 20 in 2015 and 17 in 2020. The BPF is an offshoot of the earlier Bodo Liberation Tigers, a ruthless militant outfit which was a party to the Memorandum signed in 2003. While the BPF won without any opposition in the first BTAD elections in 2005 and even in the 2010 BTAD elections, however, in 2015 their dominance stands seriously contended by both non-Bodo and independent candidates who reflect the rising power of a strong non-Bodo opposition, a reality which the BPF can hardly afford to ignore. Interestingly, the electoral fray is no longer confined to the Bodo political parties or non-Bodo organizations but national parties like BJP and Congress are equally competing to represent themselves in the Territorial Council making the elections a multi cornered one. The BJP which had won just one seat in 2015 has won 9 seats in 2020 elections and that too not with the BJP-BPF alliance which was the partnership in the 2016 Assam legislative elections. BPF has been a partner in the NEDA (North east Democratic Alliance) and the BJP-BPF combine has fought the 2016 Assembly elections jointly. However, relationship between the two soured after BTC was put under Governor’s rule from April onwards owing to the dissolution of the BTC on completion of its 5 year tenure. Elections could not be held in May due to the ongoing pandemic. In the December 2020 elections, BPF won 17 seats, UPPI-12 seats, BJP -9 seats, INC-1, GSP-1. The new party UPPL formed by erstwhile ABSU leader PromodBoro who was also a signatory to the 2020 Accord depicts a new level of match making in the BTC area. The independent Lok

Sabha MP Naba Kumar Sarania's, newly formed party GSP has won 1 seat. UPPL earlier called PCDR which was a conglomeration of various political and non-political parties was formed in 2015 to counter the rising dominance of BPF. The new party was formed uniting two regional political parties, the Bodoland Peoples' Progressive Front (BPPF) and United Democratic People's Front (UDPF), apart from the PCDR members. With the floating of the new party, both the BPPF and UDPF were dissolved unanimously. The UPPR represents the tribal interest in the region.

The dominance of the BPF has been questioned in the Lok Sabha elections when it could not win the Kokrajhar Lok Sabha seat. In both 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the single Lok Sabha seat, Kokrajhar which also happens to be the headquarters of BTC was taken by an independent candidate, Naba Kumar Sarania who was backed by non-Bodo organizations. The BPF despite having its hold and dominance in the BTAD Council located in Kokrajhar (consists of 31% Bodos) itself could not win the Lok Sabha constituency which could have been so vital for the representation of Bodo cause in the Parliament. Whatever might be the reason it is not without serious implications. It can hardly be denied that the failure of the BTC government to protect the legitimate rights and interests of the non-Bodos resulted in the proliferation of non-Bodo organizations and their increasing representation both at the Council as well as parliamentary level. In 2019 Lok Sabha elections Sarania supported by non-Bodo organizations was voted back to power again winning a comfortable majority. This may be attributed to the fratricidal clashes over leadership issues within the BPF which is highly self-defeating to the cause of the Bodos as well as between BPF and NDFB. On the contrary, the non-Bodo candidate won the elections because of the strong alliance between the diverse non-Bodo communities and their desperation to make a united front to wrest control over their legitimate share of land and resources. The non-Bodo tribal interests have not been protected by either the state or Central Government.

The BTC elections portrays a politics of ethnic outbidding, fratricidal clashes with each Bodo political party trying to outbid the other, eventually bifurcating and endangering of representation of Bodo interest. The rise of the BJP and non-Bodo organizations like Jangustio Aikyo Mancha, People's Co-ordination for Democratic Rights, A-Bodo Surakha Samiti UPPL, GSP, has been phenomenal and its alliance with the non Bodo organizations

### **Conclusion**

The present study has attempted to critically examine the politics of recognition within the model of ethno-federal self-rule through two case studies, Gorkhaland movement in West Bengal and Bodoland movement in Assam, the strategies of the state and the Centre as well as the responses of the 'other' ethnic communities in the region.

It should be noted that the Bodoland and Gorkhaland movements are similar in

terms of the competitive dominance of one group vis-a vis others. The level of autonomy enjoyed by the Bodos are much higher than the Gorkhas. While in the case of Gorkhaland, the state government was aligned with the ethnic others like the Lepchas and Bhutias by giving them recognition through the creation of Development Boards, in the case of non-Bodos, the Assam government has not taken any initiative to protect their interests leading to the rise of numerous non-Bodo organizations to wrest their due share of rights and recognition. Secondly, the BJP has consistently maintained the need to recognise Gorkhaland in all its election manifestos but has turned a blind eye when elections were over. However, the response of the Central government towards the Bodo homeland demand has been more accommodative irrespective of the party in power at the Centre. In 1993 when the first Bodo accord was signed, the Congress was in power and in 2003 when the second Bodo Accord was signed, the NDA led BJP was in power and when the 2020 Accord was signed the BJP is in power. However, in a bid to rein in militancy in upper plains of Assam, the central government has signed the Accords with the militant outfits, the BLT in 2003 and NDFB in 2020, completely undermining the demographic complexities of the region and the fact that conceding recognition to the dominant community may lead to social exclusion of the others. Thus, the Accords instead of bringing in peace into the region has flared up violence. Thirdly, in terms of extent of autonomy enjoyed by GTA in Darjeeling and BTC in Bodoland, the latter enjoys more autonomy in terms of legislative, executive and financial powers. Despite the differences, one stark fact remains common and that is the exclusion of the non-Gorkhas and non-Bodos who despite comprising 70 percent of the population are excluded from power sharing and shared rule.

In the two case studies, self-rule becomes a prescription for socio-political exclusion of communities and hinders the very principle of shared rule applicable in federative arrangements. Clearly, territory and ethnicity do not necessarily coincide and conceding territorial recognition to an ethnic community in a multi-layered complex reality brings in more complexities and ethnic strife. The West Bengal case truly represents a situation where territorial claims to an ethnic identity clearly is not a panacea but has brought the Lepchas, Bhutias, Tamangs in the line of confrontation with the Gorkhas. Though the TMC led state government has tried to cash in the differences by creating Development Boards for the ethnic communities but they are mostly non-functional and lack autonomy, being wholly dependent on the State Government for funds. Similarly, the BTC has witnessed the rise of non-Bodo organizations who have fielded an independent candidate in the Kokrajhar Lok Sabha constituency who won the 2019 elections. It is interesting to note that in Kokrajhar, the BTC headquarters, an independent candidate wins election backed by 70 % of the non Bodos. Thus, the West Bengal and Assam experience reflects that conceding of territorial autonomy to an ethnic group as a part of the 'politics of recognition' leads to ethnic exclusion of 'others' leading to the rise of new micro ethnic conflicts where every ethnic community attempt to outbid another ethnic group to gain territorial recognition. The entire debate

of majority-minority claims needs to be reformulated given the fact that the model which worked in the 60s and 70s may not work today in a post globalised world where development concerns are intertwined with identity needs. What calls is reformulation of power sharing institutions and introducing multicultural governance where different ethnic groups have a right to represent themselves and here the state has to go beyond the politics of appeasing one at the cost of several others.

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## **Electoral Politics and the Issue of Marginalization: A Study of the Tea Garden Community of Assam**

**Phulmoni Das<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*Tea garden workers of Assam belongs to more than two million migrant workers, who worked under the condition of indentured servitude in tea plantation in Assam, producing tea for an increasingly profitable global market. But the socio economic condition of tea garden workers hardly has improved in post colonial period. The tea garden community of Assam who has been in the state of marginalization has transformed as a cohesive political force since independence. But whether this transformation or consolidation into a political force has helped them to form a dominant social group within the society of Assam or whether they are able to uplift their socio economic and political status in the society is still questionable. Within this context, the present paper is an attempt to discuss the political participation and mobilization of the tea garden community of Assam. Paper reveals that despite their political mobilization and an important role in the electoral politics of Assam, their state of deprivation and marginalization still makes them subaltern.*

### **Introduction**

Subaltern Politics in India is manifested through the everyday form of resistance of the subaltern groups of people. The proliferation of Subaltern movements in India initiated an awareness of potential collective strength among the subaltern groups and has a significant impact on the bargaining position of the subaltern groups vis-a-vis, dominant groups. The subaltern struggle for their rights has expanded the arena of civil society and it widens the scope of democratic participation. Similarly the tea garden community of Assam is struggling for their rights and their struggle does not remain confined within the arena of political and civil rights but it has widened to include their social and economic rights. The experiences of State for the tea garden community are varied in different period of time. Tea garden workers of Assam belong to more than two million migrant labourers, who worked under the conditions of indentured

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servitude in tea-plantation industry, producing tea for an increasingly profitable global market. But the socio-economic conditions of the tea garden workers hardly have improved in the post-colonial period. Based on this inferior condition of tea plantation workers, they are referred to as the 'Subalterns'. They are put into the status of the subaltern as they are systematically deprived and exploited since the colonial days, and whose condition is still not improved. By looking into the deplorable life of the tea garden community of Assam it is clear that the postcolonial state is also somehow unable to realized the expectations and needs of the community. Nevertheless State is still seen as locus of their expectation and the institution which is responsible for their welfare. In short, tea garden community continues to repose hope in Indian State and the community views state as a mechanism to solve their issues and perceives state as the agent of bringing welfare to the community. For that purpose of articulating their different interests in front of the State, diverse socio political organizations have been formed by the educated elites of the community.

Within this context, the political condition of the community can be analysed through Partha Chatterjee's concept of 'political society'. Though they are formally 'citizens' with right to vote, they are not connected to state through any juridical and constitutional framework of rights. Rather they are connected through 'temporal, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at via direct negotiation'. (Chatterjee,2008) Subaltern of political society manipulate the electoral democracy and governmental categories for their benefits and they use violence, the hallmark of the old subaltern to attract the attention of the state towards a particular problem and to elicit a particular response.( Nilsen and Roy,2015) Similarly the tea garden community is not merely the denizens of political society as described by Chatterjee but they are being mobilized democratically and asserts their rights and they claims over the state for their demands. Although Chatterjee does not see the formation and the politics of political society, the tea garden community explicitly involves in the politics of the state. They have formulated different socio political organization with the help and support of the elites of the community and try to mobilize their demands through these organizations. As Alam, points out that post-colonial democracy in India began as the trust between the elites and the masses where masses were promised to provide welfare measures and in return it delegated the elites the power to rule.(Javed, 2004) The emergence of the educated elites has created an illusion of consensus between the community at large and the elites.

### **Emergence of Political Elites of the Tea Garden Community of Assam**

The composition of political elite in terms of India is related with the nexus of caste, class and power politics. Political elite in India tend to be heavily drawn from higher socio-economic groupings in society in terms of caste, occupation and education. But ever since independence with adoption of the concept of democratic decentralization, adult franchise, secularism and egalitarianism laid the foundation for reshaping the political future of India. Therefore it is not always the minority ruling groups which

come from the upper caste or class of the society. Political elite lacks the coherence and homogeneity and there is no necessary congruence between social, economic, and political power. Because it is observed that a new group of elites are emerging from the subaltern classes of the Indian society. Different cultural, ethnic, social, tribal and agrarian movements articulating the demands and aspirations of weaker sections, minorities, and women, rural and urban poor have provided up new leadership and are able to get the support of the masses. Some of these leaders' joined the political parties and contested elections which helped in reshaping the politics of the nation. The educated elites of the tea garden community of Assam emerged from the various background have begun to articulate the demands and needs of the community. The educated elites of the community comprises of different sections of the society such as politics, society, literature etc and these elites are playing a significant role in terms of formulation of different organizations which gives a new trend to the politics of the state.

Emergence of educated and the political elite among the tea garden community of Assam did not happen suddenly. It is with the gradual formation of the community among them from their shared history of exploitation, movement, migration and servitude which later on helped them to emerge as a community. It is with the wider scope of peoples participation, favorable conditions for using their democratic rights, universalisation of education etc gradually developed a realization among them to organize among themselves to assert their rights and demands. Consequently there emerged a group of enlightened leaders who started perceiving that the strong organization is necessary for the community to realize their needs and objectives. Development of such perception and realization helped to formulate different socio political organizations. Through these organizations the community is trying to present their demands and interest. It began to place a number of grievances before the concerned authorities seeking fair solution for the cause of the welfare of the community. Educated elites of the community have started joining the politics of the state with the aim of making the community's voice laudable in the house of the assembly.

Presently, the tea garden community of Assam has become one of the potential political force with a number of leaders representing the community have started joining the politics. In this case Indian National Congress (INC) was successful in articulating and mobilizing the tea garden workers with the support of Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS). INC therefore tried to politically accommodate the thriving tea garden workers and ex-tea garden labours elite by projecting the elites of the community as the candidates from the tea garden dominated constituencies of Assam. But this accommodative strategy not only remained with the INC, this has been taken up by the other political parties also. Political parties later on, national or regional, have accorded considerable weightage and due recognition to the tea garden community's leaders as an emerging potential political force whose support is highly require for them to install their government. The trajectory of the political culture of the tea garden community can be manifested by understanding their orientation towards the

political system, during pre and post independence periods of Indian history. Indian political culture in pre independence era was characterized with a national political culture without any sub-cultural forces which itself exhibits the presence of united discontent against British colonialism. Participation of Indian community in nationalist movement has gradually shaped to evolve an organized political culture during the colonial period. The provincial wide political upheaval that followed was an integral part of the national upsurge triggered by the call for national movement. In Assam also the tea garden workers fought back at their individual gardens with the objective to end up the exploitation, deprivation & serfdom condition they had under colonial regime. Though the plantation workers of Assam were weak, powerless, unorganized and ignorant compared to the powerful tea planters, the struggling spirit of the tea garden community was very strong. The tea garden community rose into protest against the colonial hegemony even before India's organized nationalist movement. The strikes and protest of tea garden labourers were latter on had shaped to develop a political culture of the community. But what is interesting here is that all these movements were not carried out in an organized way and their own interest was not articulated with a political agenda to fight against the planter's management. The famous Chargola Exodus, 1921 is a landmark in the history of the plantation workers movement in Cachar which had rocked the entire plantation world. In spite of having struggling spirit of tea garden workers, they did not get enough support from the leaders of Congress and from the mainstream Assamese society for which they remained unaware about many political issues of colonial India. However the Arunabund Labour strike of 1939 provided an opportunity not only to the political leaders of all different ideologies but also to the ordinary men of the locality to come to a common platform to augment labour movement in Cachar. Things have changed later on. It is under the leadership of political party, especially the Indian National Congress (INC) and Communist Party of India (CPI), the labourers working in various industries begun to organize. As a result, in 1920s INC and CPI jointly formed the All India Trade Union of Congress (AITUC) and since then the latter began to represent worker's interest. (Behal, 1985) The phase of labour struggles during 1937-40s can be regarded as the turning point in Assam's history in more than one respect. The formation of tea garden labour union was also a remarkable development during the period of 1939-40 which led to the initiation of political mobilization of tea garden community in the post colonial period.

A matured political culture of a community is based on the foundation of political awareness of the people of the community. Political awareness includes the participation in election, awareness about the voting rights which build not only a strong political system but also a well developed political culture. Political participation denotes activities through which citizens shared in selecting their government. In this context it is necessary to examine the role of the tea garden community in electoral politics of Assam as it reflects the political awareness of the community on the political process. Tea garden community of Assam has played an effective role in the electoral politics of Assam even before the independence. During the freedom struggle of India, a

wave of political consciousness among them was seen. The implementation of the Government of India Act, 1935 empowered the tea planters and tea workers in Assam to elect representatives to the Assam Legislative Assembly (see Table No. 1). This can be regarded as the milestone for the tea garden workers to participate in the decision making process.

**Table 1: Special Constituencies of Assam Legislative Assembly Allotted by Government of India 1935 Act**

Sl. No.	Special Constituencies	No. of Seats
1	a) Backward Plain Tribes	4
	b) Backward Hill Tribes	5
2	a) European Planters	7
	b) Indian planters	2
3	a) Commerce and Industries (European )	1
	b) Commerce and Industries (Indian)	1
	Tea Garden Labour	4

Source: *Election Returns showing the results of elections in India in 1937, New Delhi 1937*

As per the Government of India Act 1935, in 1937 tea garden labourers were allotted four seats in the legislative assembly of Assam. With this provision, a sense of awareness was generated, and they began to feel that they too have a say in the decision making process of the province.

The four labour seats and the persons elected in April, 1937 Assam legislative Assembly Election are cited in the table no. Below:

**Table 2: Elected Representations of the Labour Constituencies in Assam**

Constituencies	District	Representative Elected
Doomdooma	Lakhimpur	Besishi Pan Tanti
Jorhat	Sibsagar	Bhirab Chandra Das
Thakurbari	Darrang	Binod Kr. J. Sarwan
Silchar (Chatla Valley)	Cachar	Parameshwar Parida

Source: *(Assam legislating Assembly, 1939, p. 949)*

### **Role of ACMS and the Electoral Politics of Tea Garden Community**

In the post independence period also the voters of tea garden community became very important for the political parties as they resided in clusters in a heavy number which made the political parties easy to address them. Voters of this community played a decisive role in the results of election in many Assembly constituencies. There are about 38 Assembly constituencies in Brahmaputra valley where tea workers played an important role in election. With the democratization of political system in the post-

colonial Assam, the role of tea trade unions played a very important role in mobilizing politically the tea garden community of Assam. In this context, the role played by the Assam Chah Mazdor Sangha is also not an exception to it. It has played an important role in supporting many of the tea garden leaders to win election. In fact the ACMS, affiliated to Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) has been organizing the tea labour of Assam since 1958. The organizational strength of INTUC in the tea belt of the Bramaputra valley had been one of the reasons for congress dominance in the Brahmaputra valley. It may be evident from the 1951 Assam Legislative Assembly election results, where elected leaders like Omeo Kumar Das, Chanu Kheria, Dalbir Singh Lohar, Jadunath Bhuyan happened to be the prominent Leaders for starting a trade union among the Tea garden workers. Since the birth of ACMS, it has been providing support to the Congress. ACMS is acting like a platform for many congress leaders of the tea garden community to join the politics. The organizational strength of ACMS is also very high. ACMS has its constitutional units in 786 tea gardens of Assam Valley and its membership is more than 4 lakhs 50 thousands. ACMS has got affiliation to various important labour organizations in the world because of its wider membership and functionaries. ( Joyjatra 1962) As an affiliating trade union to the INTUC, ACMS has been working as a Congress trade union. The organizational supremacy of the ACMS and the legacy of its leadership in initial period have helped in sustaining its control over other unions in almost the Brahmaputra valley. In most tea gardens, the word trade Union is synonymous with ACMS. (Sharma 2009) Because of the wide support provided by the workers to ACMS, Congress has able to made a strong presence in the gardens of Brahmaputra Valley. The formation of ACMS has provided the TGLs a legitimate strength to ventilate their grievances before the government and the plantation authority. Most of the ACMS leaders have been elected from various constituencies to both the state legislative assembly and the Lok Sabha Constituencies of Assam. Since the winning of Chanoo Kheria in 1952 to the Assam Legislative Assembly, a good numbers of leaders have joined the state politics, and these leaders were directly associated with the ACMS. The name of these leaders are like, Malia Tanti (Doomdooma), Dipak Murmu (Lahowal), Upen Sanatan (Chabua), Gajen Tanti (Mariani), Chtra Gopal Karmakar (Sarupathar), Rameswar Dhanowar (Digboi), Dileswar Tanti (Doomdooma), Prithivi Majhi (Lahowal), Joychandra Nagbanshi (Moran), Rupam Kurmi (Mariani), Dinesh Prasad Gowala (Lakhipur), Monilal Gowala (Patharkandi), Mithius Tudu (Gossaigoan), Silvius Condpan (Mazbat), Boloram Nag (Kaliabar), Arkilius Tirkey, (Sarupathar), Narad Kumar (mahmara), Satya Tanti (Sonari) etc.( Thapa 2006)

Apart from the Assam Legislative Assembly election of 1951, in the 1<sup>st</sup> Lok Sabha election also, ACMS gave their full support to the two trade union activist namely Jogendra Nath Hazarika and Kamakhya Prasad Triparthi who won general election from Dibrugarh and Darrang district respectively. Similarly, on the eve of second Assam Legislative Assembly election in 1957, the Indian National Congress gave sixteen ACMS backed candidate and out of them fifteen candidates won the election.

Within the limited scope of the study, the list of candidates who won the Assam Legislative election in (1951, 1985, and 2011) with the support of ACMS is shown in table no.3 and 4 below:

**Table 3: 1951 Election**

Constituency	Candidate	Party	Result
Moran	P.Kumari Gohainadena	INC	Not Elected

*Source: Statistical Report on general election, 1951 to the Legislative Assembly of Assam, E.C.I.*

**Table 4: Assam Legislative Assembly Election, 1985**

Constituency	Candidate	Party	Result
Majbat	Silvius Condpan	INC	Elected
Kaliabar	Baloram Nag	INC	Not Elected
Sarupathar	Akilius Tirki	INC	Not Elected
Mariani	Siba Buragohain	INC	Not Elected
Lahowal	Dipak Maomoo	INC	Not Elected
Tingkhong	P.S. Ghatowar	INC	Not Elected
Chabua	Upendra Nath Lanton	INC	Not Elected
Digboi	Rameswar Dhanwar	INC	Elected
Doomdooma	Dileshwari Tanti	INC	Elected

*Source: Statistical Report on general election, 1985 to the Legislative Assembly of Assam, E.C.I.*

**Table 5: 2011 Election**

Constituency	Candidate	Party	Result
Rangapara	Bhinnananda Tanti	INC	Elected
Sarupathar	Aklius Tirky	INC	Elected
Mariani	Rupjyoti Kurmi	INC	Elected
Moran	Jiwantara Ghatowar	INC	Elected
Lahowal	Prithyivi Majhi	INC	Elected
Tingkhong	Mtuwa Munda	INC	Elected
Chabua	Raju Saha	INC	Elected
Digboi	Rameswar Dhanower	INC	Elected
Doomdooma	Rupesh Gowala	INC	Not Elected

*Source: Statistical Report on general election, 2011 to the Legislative Assembly of Assam, E.C.I.*

Tea garden leaders have set for winning the election and landside victory in the political history of the ACMS. Trade union politics in the tea gardens have contributed to the rise of many leaders who got elected not only in Assam Legislative election but also in the parliamentary election and thereby have created a new dimension to political culture of the tea garden community. Chatragopal Karmakar became the first minister from the tea community in Mahendra Mohan Chaudhury's Govt. in 1971. The Marioni

MLA, Gajen Tanti became the first Cabinet minister in Sarat Chandra Sinha's ministry (1972-78). Gajen Tanti had been entrusted with the portfolio of labour, Supplies and cooperatives. During the three decade long Congress regime in the states the tea community came to forefront of electoral politics. The election results that have revealed that tea garden community have been capable of enhancing their numerical strength in Assam legislative Assembly.

In fact the tea garden community has increasingly become conscious of their democratic right to vote & to be voted for their development at large. ACMS sponsored INC (I) nominee Paban Singh Ghatowar who was a leading figure of TGLs Community won the Lok Sabha seat of Dibrugarh defeating the AGP candidate named Dipen Tanti with a huge margin of votes in the year 1991. He was re-elected in 1996, 1998 and 1999. In 2009, he was elected to Parliament again from Dibrugarh. (Times of India 2016) Likewise Paban Singh Ghatowar, the ACMS backed candidate was inducted as the Member of Parliament (MP) also submitted a memorandum to the Congress High Command Sonia Gandhi at New Delhi on 20<sup>th</sup> December, 2000 for the reservation of 35 Assam Legislative Assembly seats for tea garden community of Assam. Presently voters of the tea garden community dominate at least 38 constituencies of Assam and ACMS played an important role in the political affairs of the state. The tea community has been said to be the support base of the Congress that made the party always win in the tea garden community dominated constituencies. Paban Singh Ghatowar one of the notable leaders of Congress has given his view in support of the community towards ACMS, said, that the Tea and the Ex-Tea gardens voters has been loyal to the Congress Party whereas other people left the Congress Party.'(Memorandum 2006)

Election results mentioned above reflects how the ACMS backed candidates played a decisive role in Indian contemporary politics. It is a prominent platform for the political parties to popularize, disseminate and influence their ideologies and there by mobilize public opinion. But the situation have changed radically, in fact the other parties like AGP, BJP has also realized the importance of tea garden community's votes and they have also fielded a number of candidates who belonged to the tea garden community. A change came to the political scenario of the state in 1985. AGP made a strong presence in the heavily tea workers populated constituencies in Jorhat and Lakhimpur districts. The candidates belonged to the tea community, who won on AGP ticket were Naren Tanti from Mariani constituency, Binod Goala from Sarupathar, Barki Prasad Telenga from Thowra, Dipen Tanti from Lahowal. AGP has also floated a trade union organization called the Assam Shah Sharamik Parishad, a rival trade union to counter the well entrenched ACMS. ACMS again played an important role in this regard where because of opposing anti-foreigner movement, many congress (I) candidates could not win election of 1985. Congress leaders like Hiteshwar Saikia, Keshab Gogoi could win on the votes of tea labourers. Hiteshwar Saikia even admitted that congress got intact votes of the tea garden labourers and the defeat was mainly due to the heavy polling by the Assamese voters. The Assam legislative assembly election of 1998 was important because of the election boycott called by the extremist outfit United

Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which had a significant impact on the voting trend of the masses. This had further added uncertainty and confusion among the people. As there was only 35 percent poll done in the Jorhat Lok Sabha Constituency. But out of ten Legislative assembly constituency in the Jorhat Lok Sabha constituency, five assembly constituencies dominated by the tea garden community have done very well. In those five constituencies the INC (I) candidates gained more votes in comparison to his nearest rival candidates. As the report made by the State's leading Daily news paper, Assam Tribune, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1999.

'Low polling in this constituency, where the tea tribe comprises about 30 percent of total votes of over 10 lacs, put Congress in an advantageous position over the rival parties. The reason is that even if the polling is low, majority of the tea workers exercise their franchise. As tea workers are the traditional support base for congress in the tea heartland of upper Assam, mass voting by them in case of low poll turnout gives Congress candidates an edge over their rivals. That is why Congress never leaves any stone unturned to ensure mass voting by tea garden workers'. ( Assam Tribune ,1999)

**Table 6: Parliamentary Election Assam Constituency wise Statistics of Winner Candidates of TGLs and Ex-TGLs Community**

Year of Election	Name of Candidates	Party	Constituency	Vote	Margin
1977	Haren Bhumij	INC	Dibrugarh	119882	14209
1985	Bhadreswar Tanti	AGP	Kaliabar	240647	89000
	Haren Bhumij	INC	Dibrugarh	229263	42055
1991	Paban Singh Ghatowar	INC	Dibrugarh	243973	137920
1996	Paban Singh Ghatowar	INC	Dibrugarh	281253	107355
1998	Paban Singh Ghatowar	INC	Dibrugarh	234195	141122
1999	Paban Singh Ghatowar	INC	Dibrugarh	270863	67116
2009	Joseph Toppo	AGP	Tezpur	352246	30153
	Paban Singh Ghatowar	INC	Dibrugarh	359163	35143
2014	Kamakhya Prasad Tasa	BJP	Jorhat	456420	102420
	Rameswar Teli	BJP	Dibrugarh	494364	185347

Source: Elections Report, Government of Assam

This election turnout once again proved that tea garden workers have supported the Congress. However the other political parties were also equally trying to mobilised the community for their interest. Likewise the regional political party AGP, BJP has also started concentrating on developing its own pockets of influence in the tea belt. It is evident with the winning of election of Rameshwar Tally, Kamakhya Prasad Tasha (BJP) as the Member of Parliament in 2014 election from the Dibrugarh and Jorhat constituency respectively. The tea garden labourers most often are considered as vote bank for a definite political party, and thought to be devoid of ideological commitments to politics, because their voting patterns were directed by their leaders of ACMS. But

in this context the victory of Motilal Kanu from Pather Kandi constituency (1967) and Dinesh Prasad Goala from Lakhimpur constituency (1983) as independent candidates were something remarkable as the tea labourers are usually considered as the vote bank of congress. This community has in fact played a decisive role in the victories of the Congress candidates of Upper Assam. (Goswami, 2004)

Apart from playing a decisive role in the state politics of Assam, Tea garden and Ex-tea garden community of Assam has been playing a significant role in the Parliamentary Election of the nation. Here the following table shows how the political leaders from this community has been successfully elected since 1977 to 2014 and they have been elected not only from Congress but also from other political parties such as AGP and BJP, they have able to made a significant impact in the politics of the state as well as in the country as a whole.

### **BJP's Inroads to the Tea Garden Community of Assam**

In the foregoing discussion, it is seen that contemporary trend in electoral politics in the state showed the declining influence of the Congress amidst the tea garden workers. Electoral politics of the state has shifted to a different trend in the beginning of 1985. The one party dominance system is gradually giving way to the multiparty system in which different political parties and regional party started playing a significant role. The support of the Congress Party shows a remarkable decline while a regional party like AGP and the other parties such as BJP have been able to consolidate its hold in Assam politics. The AGP in fact, has started the Assam Chah Shramik Parishad to counter the INTUC. Different student's organisations such as All Assam Students Union (AASU), All Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (AATSA), All Assam Adivasis Students Association (AAASA) etc have been trying to influence the Tea garden community of Assam. The AASU too has been trying to influence the Tea Tribal Students Organisation. (ibid 2008) Student's organisations are also playing a decisive role in politically mobilising the tea garden community of Assam. The other parties like AGP and BJP are spreading their influence among tea community of Assam.

Despite having regional political party and the presence of Congress as the dominant political party, BJP has been continuously rising and able to make its stronghold in the state politics of Assam by winning both parliamentary and state assembly election of Assam. It is in this context the rise of BJP in the politics of the state can be contextualised. Since General elections 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has successfully challenged the dominance of Congress, particularly in the state of Assam. Similarly since 2016 and subsequently followed by 2019 as well as recently conducted assembly election of 2021 in the state, has also given mandate in favor of BJP.

One of the striking feature of 2021 election was that , BJP has successfully consolidated different ethnic groups and communities including tea garden communities of Assam. These communities constitute around 17% of Assam's total population and have a

35%–40% vote share in the Brahmaputra Valley. In the 2014 Lok Sabha and the 2016 assembly elections, the BJP's performance had been extraordinary in upper Assam primarily due to the shifting of these communities towards the BJP, which used to be a solid vote bank of the Congress in the past. (Pisharoty,2019) In the past five years BJP has introduced financial, educational and health schemes for tea garden workers of Assam , including the hike of wages from Rs137 to Rs 217 are some of the important contributory factor for shifting their support to BJP. BJP's government ambitious move to ensure financial inclusion of tea garden workers of Assam under 'Cha Bagichar Dhan Purasakar Mela' (fair for gifting wealth to tea garden workers) through which Rs 2500 were credited to tea garden workers who hold bank account is can be referred as the one of the important step of BJP's inroads to tea garden workers of Assam. But despite their dominant role in state politics and the fact that a large number of legislators who themselves belong to the community, the living conditions of tea garden workers have hardly improved.

### **False Promises, Rhetoric and Deprivation of the Tea Garden Community of Assam**

Political parties are able to corner the votes of the tea garden community, since the community also plays a decisive role in the politics of the state. However no political parties sincerely raised the crucial issues related to the basic rights of the tea garden workers as a political issue affecting citizens. But during the election time, the community becomes the subject of public focus. The plight of the tea garden workers of Assam have not changed. Illiteracy, poverty, poor standard of living condition and limited health facilities are like the part and parcel of the garden's life. Land alienation is one of the main issues for the community, although both the political party such as Congress and BJP made the poll promises of giving land to the tea garden community, the promises never become a reality for the community. Neither of the political parties has done anything specific in solving the major livelihood issues of the community. Even voters have lost the confidence in either the leadership, or in the parties they have voted for in the past, they continue to vote in large numbers. The reason is the community still trusts democracy. The community participates in a growing numbers within the electoral process and assertively reaffirms their faith in democracy. It is true that democracy has enabled the political empowerment of various disadvantaged groups, but the expansion of the political arena does not bring the political equality to the subalterns in true sense of the term. The increased representation of the tea garden community in the legislature and other policy making bodies has not translated into social and economic gains for the members of the community. It is seen that the commitment of the elite to the community has been rhetorical and the state authority to accomplish the needs of the community has also been limited. In spite of representing the community politically, the elites of the community are unable to make significant changes in the socio economic condition of the tea garden community. Almost all the political parties, such as Congress and BJP have included lucrative promises in their agendas but most of them remained unfulfilled. The major promises such as giving land pattas to the tea garden community to those who are living in government ceiling

lands are made by both the Congress and BJP.(Manifesto) But this promise has yet to be implemented and the issue of not getting land pattas makes them insecure in terms of enjoying their rights. Again not giving demanded wages of Rs 351 to the tea garden workers is the major issue which have been neglected by both the leaders and political parties. The issue of not recognising the scheduled tribe status to the tea garden community of Assam is again an unfulfilled promise made by the community leaders.

It is seen that subaltern political culture in India has been differ from the political culture of elites. But in the *Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee had given different opinions that the politics of elite and subaltern has been shaped by the 'emergent from the other'. (Chatterjee, 1993) Elite politics has had to acknowledge the political culture of the subaltern and they are trying to negotiate with their own terms for the purpose of producing the consent. Whereas the politics of subaltern become increasingly familiar with and even trying to adapted itself to the institutional forms of characteristics of the elite' domain.(Ibid,1993) Subaltern groups have become familiar with the spread of governmental technologies which has been the result of the deepening reach of the developmental state under electoral democracy.(Chatterjee, 2008) As a result the subalterns groups have adapted themselves with the workings of the governmental agencies and skilful in manipulating their technologies of rule so as to ensure the delivery of services and entitlements.(Chatterjee, 2011) Thus the greater interaction between the political culture of the elite and subaltern not operates separately; rather their politics have been supported by each other domain. Tea garden community of Assam being one of the marginalized and subaltern sections of the society began to utilize public institutions, governmental technologies and democratic discourses of the state to challenge the adverse power structure in contemporary time. Moreover these perspectives suggest that the potential of tea garden community's participation and democratic deepening is significant in the politics of the state. Although in every class divided society there is the division between the privileged and the subaltern classes, Tea garden community as subaltern group is situated outside the mainstream society and being characterized by the absence of civic rights , liberty, security and social justice and marked by the marginalization, struggle for their existence, oppression and their attempt to resist. Thus the politics of the tea garden community exists and operates within the discourse of the elite politics. The view of Spivak is significant here, because the Spivak does not agree with the subaltern historians that the subaltern is a sovereign political subject. According to her, sovereignty of the subaltern is only an effect of the dominant discourse. The tea garden community of Assam has been emerging as the cohesive community with the potentiality to influence as a political force. Despite politically represented, they are unable to get rid of their state of marginality. It could only be possible when they become able to shed of their state of marginality with the strong attempt to represent their interest, rather than becoming an accommodative or merging their interest with that of the interest of the elites.

### Concluding Observation

As it has been discussed above that in spite of the tea-community emerging as a dominant political force in the politics of the state, local leaders or the elites of the community have been negotiating and discarding the interest of their own community and have accommodated themselves with that of the politics of the elites of the mainstream society. But the remaining tea garden community is acting like the agonistic way, their political subjectivities are agonistic and they combine the efforts of contest and collaboration, resistance and negotiation, defense and offence. They are trying to make an impact in the political domain through emphasizing their differences. It is not to be wrong to say that both the state and associated elites have sought to replicate the 'rule of colonial differences', in post colonial world. Although the state and elitist have been trying to perpetuate difference even in the post colonial time, but there is no reason to believe that the subalterns are so completely hegemonies that they consent and contribute to sustaining this difference. As the tea garden community is vocal about the ideas of socio, economic and political equality rather than accepting the domination and hegemony of the mainstream classes, they have been resisting and revolting and protesting against the plantation authority, against the state since the colonial days. The community has been vocal about social equality, justice and dignity and invocation of these values does not detract them from the possibility of negotiating with the government and other political actors for accessing the targeted welfare programmes and social welfare schemes. Rather, it serves or helps them to widen their political horizons and encourage them to imagine alternatives possibilities and other way of being.

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## **Beyond Conflict and Territory: Re-imagining Resilience in Displacement through Narratives of an Adivasi Village in Bodoland, Assam**

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### **Abstract**

*Most ethnic conflicts in Northeast India are fallout of colonial era policies and contesting versions of indigeneity, but their lesser researched impact on the human realm of survivors hold important hints for the future. The paper as a contextual background theoretically explores the role of indigeneity and territory in producing political violence in Bodoland in Assam and re-produces narratives of resilience of a community of Adivasis who had been displaced in the regional militant led violence. The paper has tried to show how resilience is a complex quality that entail attributes like, among others, refusal to surrender, putting faith in prayers, holding onto identity cards with original address, ways of co-existence with the conflicting community through church based dialogues or anti-alcohol campaigns. These narratives of resilience point towards hopeful possibilities in the Northeast, a space popularly viewed through the optics of chaotic violence, when conflict is also characterised by survivors as external and a disruption of life worlds.*

### **Introduction**

The recent Bodo Accord signed in the month of January 2020 has raised hopes of reaching an enduring peace, but it has also re-kindled long lingering insecurities among the non-Bodo communities in the now officially re-named as the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), geographically located in Western parts of the Northeast Indian state of Assam. It brought on board four factions of the militant National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), along with other important Bodo civil society stakeholders namely the All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) and the United Bodo People's Organisation (UBPO). The Bodos, an indigenous community from Assam, have waged a long struggle for recognition of their cultural, linguistic and political rights. Their struggle was mostly directed against the Axomiya elite politically dominant in Assam. From the late 1980s, frustrated at unfulfilled promises and a general condescension from

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the rulers at Dispur, the Bodo movement for autonomy took a militant turn.

The first attempt at a resolution in 1993 failed to stem the political turmoil. A second accord in 2003 succeeded in putting a working arrangement in place, but many Bodo groups remained alienated. It was within such a context that the third accord was welcomed for bringing together groups that had hitherto remained away. However, it also rekindled fears of the non-Bodos in the region. Apart from the elucidated reasons such as greater legislative powers to the council and greater integration of non BTC Bodo majority areas running contiguous to the BTR, this fear has a contemporary basis as non-Bodo groups like the Adivasis and Bengali Muslims have faced ethnically motivated persecution and targeted violence at the hands of Bodo militias and militant outfits since the early and mid 1990s. The existing political arrangement in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) is a “hegemonic peace” endowed by the Indian state to placate the Bodo community, as the territorial council’s 30 seats amongst a total of 40 contestable ones are reserved for Scheduled Tribes, a category that generally only the Bodos fulfil at present in the region (Mahanta, 2013). One result of such a hegemonic peace has been the systematic violence by Bodo militants on groups perceived to be non-autochthonous, particularly the Adivasis and Bengali Muslims.

The present paper is an attempt at understanding one aspect of such a violent displacement suffered by an Adivasi village community. It looks at two different but related aspects of the incident. The first is a theoretical account of indigeneity and territory coming together to produce political violence that ultimately displaced the Adivasis. The second objective is in documenting the travails of the displaced village community, later re-settled in a different area, through the lens of resilience. Resilience was not only an aspect of the community during and after displacement, it was also implicit in co-existing with the Bodos, a group they had been in a conflictual relationship with.

### **Collecting Data, Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

The present study came out of an engagement in taking remedial classes for children affected by displacement in one of the villages in the Chirang district of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam. The author was part of a team of four engaged in teaching at a primary school where the Adivasis (Mostly from the Santhal community and a few from the Munda community; however since it’s a diverse group, they will be referred to as Adivasis in the paper) had settled after leaving the relief camp where they had stayed since displacement. They were originally inhabitants of a group of villages, namely Mawpar, Aai Nodi Dhubri (Parts one, two and three), and Digholdong. These villages are located north of the village of their original habitation on the north-bank of the Aai River, a major river in the region flowing from Bhutan. These villages were affected during the violence of 1996, and again in 1998.

In the village under study the abysmal position of the Adivasi in Assam<sup>2</sup> was reflective. Literacy is low among the inhabitants and they primarily depend on daily wage labour. The dearth of an educated populace means a hierarchical society as a few community elders play the guiding role, their decisions being generally accepted in the community. Two such prominent elders- a village schoolmaster and a village pastor- were the primary respondents in the study.

The interviews with them spread over a total period of two months: twice in 2017 in the months of May and December, and once in 2018 in the month of February.

A total of seven respondents, including the two primary ones, were interviewed. The small sample size of the study did not allow generalisability, however it made possible a method of data collection through in-depth unstructured interviews over a length of time. A methodology of in-depth qualitative data collection was followed which limited sample size, but at the same time is sought from a broad group (O'Leary, 2011). "Speaking on behalf" is a justification for taking the village elders as prime respondents. Oral narratives of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) or refugees are emphatically acknowledged as a methodological approach and have a long tradition within the humanities and social sciences (Najafizadeh, 2013a). Thus, one part of the focus of the study, the other part being a theoretical exploration of the indigeneity issue and displacement related to the Adivasi in BTR, is on documenting oral narratives and locating resilience in the same narratives. Because of an oral narrative approach, the study is descriptive in nature. Comparative analyses of displacement narratives and experiences are not a priority here.

The free flowing interviews moved from the generic to the specific because of the sensitive nature of the subject. Most of the respondents were polyglots- due to the multi-ethnic nature of the society they lived in, they could speak Santhali and Bodo, coupled with a fair amount of Axomiya, Hindi and Nepali. However, all communications were in the Axomiya language with the author, and a few sentences have been produced verbatim in the narratives to give essence to the speaker. The author was politely requested to keep the interactions limited to the literate few or "people who knew things". Although it seemed like enforcing a hierarchy in the beginning, their concern was at an attempt on outlining their story in the best of words and gestures. The power a researcher un-consciously wielded in the field, it may be recalled here, makes the "embarrassment" at re-producing facts or fluency of language an undesirable issue best avoided. In other words, such a request was aimed at making the researcher's task easier (language fluency) as well as a better representation of the community's narratives (literacy and leadership). It was an emphatic portrayal of the anxieties of political fallout of a violently displaced and dispossessed community. However,

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<sup>2</sup> Human development of Adivasi in Assam, traditionally called "tea-tribes" and "tea communities", in health, education and financial status is very low. Land alienation and deprivation, human trafficking, low wage labour, and the added socio-political disadvantage of non-ST status are important factors for the extremely low level of development and empowerment.

that meant an obvious limitation-interaction with the women of the community was out of bounds. The author's perceived identity as an English educated, urban, ethnic Assamese male was an important factor. The requests were respected and adhered to by the author.

Since the volatility of the conflict is still fluid, data was not collected in audio or video formats as that might have meant self-censure as well as anxieties on part of the community. Narratives were written down within a span of five hours of the interaction. Again, due to probable volatility, real names of persons have not been used in the narratives.

Before arriving at an understanding of resilience in narratives of the Adivasis, a brief theoretical exploration on the production of political violence in the Bodoland region that ultimately displaced the Adivasis now staying at the village under study is necessary for a context to the narratives of displacement and resilience.

### **Indigeneity, Past and Friction: Agents of Displacement ?**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political consciousness of the Bodos developed in a backdrop of relative deprivation and unequal power relations with the ethnic Assamese (Baruah, 1999). Attempts at assimilation into the ethnic Assamese fold alienated them. One early instance at assimilation of Bodos was the, otherwise foresighted, Bordoloi sub-committee that was tasked with formulating a policy for the geographically located indigenous communities in the Northeast. The Bodos were understood as a part of the larger Assamese society. It reflected the British colonial era policies that did not put the plains dwelling Bodos at par with the hill dwelling communities of the Northeast like the Nagas and Mizos. Their homeland in the Western part of Assam was never classified as Backward Tracts (1919) or Partially Excluded and Excluded Areas (1935): categories reflecting a policy of segregation and apparent protection of the hill dwelling communities in undivided colonial Assam. Moreover the colonial state induced migration of East Bengali Muslim peasants to settle on and bring under cultivation what they termed as "wastelands", a colonial episteme of viewing lands, which included tribal commons and grazing pastures. Although, the Bodos were not alone to suffer dispossession as a result of these colonial era policies, the political dominance of the Assamese ruling class in the post-colonial period further gave an impetus to Bodo anxieties. The official language movement of 1960-61, medium of instruction language agitation of 1972, perceived betrayal of political and material aspirations after an early participation in the anti-foreigner Assam Agitation, and the failure of a consensus on territoriality through the first Bodo Accord of 1993 were important moments in the development of the Bodo political consciousness in post-colonial Assam.

To view theoretically, assertions of indigeneity by communities in Assam were influenced by three historical practices viz. the hills-plain divide, protection of tribal

belts and blocks, and creation of autonomous homelands. The first two policies originally devised by the colonial ethnographer state in undivided Assam found a continuity in the form of the Sixth Schedule, which led to a reification of ethno-botanical links of tribe and land (Vandekerckhove, 2009a). The result of such a link between the two, according to Sanjib Baruah, was twofold. While a genuine concern for indigenous cultures being swamped under the non-tribal Indian state behemoth was addressed, however the grant of ethnic homelands meant insecurity for other ethnic communities that shared the same living space. Assigning areas as natural habitats to specific communities meant the emergence of an “exclusive homeland consciousness” (Baruah, 2007). The solidification of ethnic identities in other colonial regimes, such as in Africa, a place where “tribalism” was deployed by the colonial anthropologists essentially to subdue the local peoples, later led to frictions between diverse communities (Oucho, 1997). As a consequence, cautions against the “costly mirage” of exclusively constituted ethnic homelands create a Balkanisation hypothesis in the Northeast (Bhaumik, 2009). Interestingly, Vandekerckhove also observes that such a “sons of the soil” narrative is different from other similar narratives that locate globalisation and decentralisation as the real instigators of ethnic conflict (Vandekerckhove, 2009b). The Bodo homeland demand movement fits the former narrative because other communities are in contestation and claim an indigeneity as genuine as the Bodos themselves. For instance, the Koch-Rajbongshis demand a separate state that overlaps in area with the region identified as homeland by the Bodos<sup>3</sup>.

The enclosing of land for extractive purposes like tea plantations and reserve forests for timber was another enduring feature of the colonial state apart from its ethnographer approach. Unlike the pre-colonial times, this led to a “tribal entrapment” that systematically denied the communities traditional rights to forest and other natural resources (Vandekerckhove and Suykens, 2008). Ensnared in between tea-estates and forests that were increasingly becoming out of bounds, the Bodos lost huge tracts of land which were traditionally used for cultivation or as grazing grounds for their cattle. However, the Bodos, like the Ahoms and other pre-colonial era communities, even at the cost of dispossession of land, refused to cooperate as workers in the tea plantations.

The problem of labour in the tea plantations was solved by forcefully securing indentured labourers of various Adivasi communities from Central and Eastern India. Their dignity of life and labour was crushed under the scheming tactics of recruiters who served the Raj. They were crowded inside steamboats and railway coaches in unhygienic and suffocating conditions, and the ones who survived the ordeal were made to settle in racially structured lines inside the tea-estates. Called “coolie lines”, a pejorative term now, these were ghettoised structures guarded from any freedom of

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<sup>3</sup> The Koch-Rajbongshi community of Assam, a group indigenous to other post-colonial spaces like Northern areas of West Bengal, Meghalaya, Nepal and Bangladesh, has been waging a long struggle for a separate state within the Indian Union. In September 2020, a new bill granting the Koch-Rajbongshis an autonomous council was passed in the state legislative assembly. The naming of the council as “Kamatapur”, and not Koch or Koch-Rajbongshi, however invited criticisms from various quarters.

movement. Their working and housing conditions have been compared to the Trans-Atlantic Slave system (Hazarika, 1994). They were discouraged to develop any relations with their local counterparts and consequently this meant social servility, political unawareness and a relative outsider status (Fernandes, 2003a). The legacy of such historical exploitations has made the Adivasi in Assam socio-politically worse off than her counterparts in other states of India like West Bengal and Jharkhand. Firstly, the Adivasis in Assam are not scheduled as tribals in the constitution, which puts them at a disadvantage regarding affirmative action in employment and education; secondly, an effective socio-religious reformation among the Adivasi society in Assam never took off, unlike in North Bengal (Fernandes, 2003b).

It might be useful to think of the precarious position of the Adivasis and their friction with the Bodo demand for an ethnic homeland through the notion of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “pastness”, essentially a claim of a common history, culture and region- factors that evolve and consolidate identities. A “real past” gives way to a “social past”. The historian can at best only interpret the “real past” which is “inscribed in stone”, whereas the “social past” changes according to political exigencies and hence is “moulded in clay”. A notion of “pastness” enables social groups to claim real nationality, real citizenship or real indigeneity (Wallerstein and Balibar, 1991)

However Wallerstein’s notion of “pastness” as producing a construct is not without its problems in the context of Northeast India, a region where assertions of indigeneity are a response to structural and oppressive power relations as well, embedded in real social and economic events. The notion is however useful in problematising political projects for exclusive ethnic homelands as certain communities are divested of autochthony to the land. An idea similar to Wallerstein’s was advanced by Satish Deshpande in his theorisation of political Hindutva, where an abstract space is linked to a concrete space to produce the approximation of a utopia. The space mediates between the ideological subjects who engage in ideological labour to move towards the utopia: a resulting ideological space. The ideological labour is necessary to thrust a cultural meaning and a political identity on a place, over and above natural factors like geography and history which are necessary raw materials for such projects, but not sufficient (Deshpande, 1995). The campaign for Bodoland, like numerous others in the Northeast, in its extreme and exclusionary manifestation of armed political violence by militias, runs the danger of such an abstraction. Indigenous assertions on land, in extreme exclusionary imaginations, tend to create “essentialist ideologies of culture and identity” (Kuper, 2003).

It is also useful to mention Derrida’s idea of hospitality while understanding political violence and indigenous assertions. Unconditional hospitality is the unrestricted reception of a guest by the host, whereas conditional hospitality tempers the unconditional through terms and conditions (Kakoliris, 2015). There is an anxiety of the host and guest changing places, and this anxiety, real or perceived, is true and substantial of many communities of the Northeast, especially against foreigners

entering through extra legal methods. Ironically, the Indian state revolving between ambivalence and suppression as a response to such indigenous assertions also displays a conditional hospitality titled “calculated kindness” when it comes to the absence of a concrete refugee policy in India (Samaddar, 2003). Similarly, an essence of “calculated kindness” can also be seen in the opposition to accord Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Adivasi in Assam by other ST communities of the state.

The Adivasi claim for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe is strongly contested by other socio-political groups articulating indigeneity in Assam, but they have been in India for as long as the earliest communities that made Assam and the Northeast their home (Xaxa, 1999). How to delimit the space where indigeneity is claimed? How does it fare for a community that had suffered forced, involuntary migration, social deprivation and economic exploitation? These are pertinent questions beyond the scope of this paper that need to be weighed in a manner not entirely conducive to immediate political claims and counter-claims. What is less nebulous is the fact that political violence is produced from an extreme articulation of territorialisation and essentialisation of identity, and in that, the Adivasi, as well as other communities like Bengali Muslims have suffered tragic violence and displacement. These episodic but violent fallouts have far reaching consequences on the affected people who are forced to develop specific forms of resilience for survival.

### **On Resilience in Displacement**

Narratives of resilience are a defining feature of the millions of refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) surviving in relief camps and foreign lands. Displaced persons and groups also co-exist with persons and groups they have been in a conflict with. Displacement necessitates a complex form of resilience that is difficult to define comprehensively, as resilience is a multidimensional concept and hence lacks a common definition. In fact, it could be all of these: moving forward, bouncing back or learning to adapt (Kaczmarek, 2017). The UK Department of International Development describes disaster resilience as “the ability of countries, communities, to manage change, by maintaining or transforming living standards in the face of shock or stress” (Majidi and Hennion, 2014). A disaster, like displacement, can lead to innovative survival tactics by the displaced. IDPs and refugees are, thus, not only victims or survivors, but also agents of change (Lund, 2004). The ability to adapt and change is crucial, especially during protracted conflicts that necessitate protracted resilience. Resilience is thus not only the ability to bounce back from disruptive life challenges, but also the capacity to go on to live and love fully (Walsh, 2003). To go on loving fully is not always the case, and as the following narratives of the displaced Adivasis from the village under study would show, the absence of a complete return to the past or the absence of love fully has its roots in a desire for justice and not necessarily in bitterness.

Displacement could mean a redistribution of resources, particularly of land, as one group could benefit at the cost of another (Wood, 2003). Such losses impair a group’s

ability to recover their socio-economic position (Justino, 2012a). Moreover, it could mean a reification of social relations because the lines between ordinary people and militants actually taking part in ethnic cleansings often get blurred. Orchestration of violence is usually directed by militants inducing common people to join in, motivated by self-interest and greed (Collier and Hoeffle, 2004). Sometimes the non participation of civilians with armed groups becomes costlier than participation. Affiliation with armed groups also means security for family and protection from rival armed groups (Justino, 2012b). Affiliation could mean refuge from indiscriminate violence and recourse to resources like information and skills that are important during crisis situations. Identity also constrains choice, thereby disallowing an end to violence as acts could be perpetrated based on identity, looked upon as violent by the other group (Kreidie and Monroe, 2002). The Bodo-Adivasi conflict witnessed the blurring of lines between armed groups or militias and common people.

A return to the past as the place of origin and former livelihoods is a popular discourse that unfortunately is not always conducive (Fagen, 2011a). For a community that is unable to make such a return, it could mean an unsuccessful integration into the new socio-political setting. The longing for home can keep a displaced community from establishing deep roots in the new space (Najafizadeh, 2013b). Such situations could potentially become intractable as communities isolated from the host society might harbour retributive impulses against the other, becoming easy recruits for armed groups partaking in political violence. Further, a transformation from victims or survivors to perpetrators could take place (Stefanovic and Loizides, 2011a). When a community displaced through violence does not become any of these potential formations, it could be a case of successful and happy integration or developing a complex layer of resilience in their relations with the other group. As the narratives would show, the Adivasis of the village under study lean towards the latter.

### **Resilience in the Relief Camp and Settlement**

Chandan Murmu still remembered in 2017 about the night his village was vacated. He taught at the old school and continued to teach in the new one after re-settling. Facing targeted attacks carried by militants, he fled with others from his village at Aai Nodi Dhubri Number 2 in May 1996. Until then, said Chandan Murmu, they had no reason to suspect any violence and the threats to vacate their homes came unanticipated. He explained:

*We were hearing about the violence. There were a lot of news all around through word of mouth, but we had faith that we would not be harmed....The people we had lived together with for so many years, suddenly came to us, telling us how much they did not want to harm us physically. They warned us to leave before they were forced to change their minds. Before that we were asking our neighbours of other ethnicities to not leave...Pisot tu aamie jabo logia hol(But we were the next to leave)*

The Adivasis did not expect that their fellow neighbours and old acquaintances would ask them to leave. As decades old ties broke down, it showed how indigeneity claims tend to re-classify perceived relative insiders as different and dangerous, leading to pre-emptive strikes against a social group (Li, 2002). In a sense, the land has to be purged of non-autochthons (Vandekerckhove, 2009c). These assertions are clearly a threat to different but non discrete communities in the Northeast, testified by numerous ethnic clashes over the years, apart from human rights violations by the state backed security forces.

After being asked to leave, Chandan Murmu, who knew the militants in person, tried and failed in persuading them. The young men of his village crossed the flooded Aai river that lay to the south and assisted the children and the old. A pregnant lady conceived a baby in the river. Terrified and tired, they found shelter in the field of a veterinary college, later converted into a relief camp, at about five kilometres of distance from the river bank. The field sheltered about ninety families from the cluster of villages beyond the river, including Chandan Murmu's village. A police station, college and a few schools were situated nearby the veterinary ground, giving a sense of security. Although the camp was located at only a few kilometres distance from their uprooted homes, it was a case of forced displacement, because as noted by Ulrich Oslender, displacement is not only characterised over long distances as forced movement across villages even along the same river falls in the category of displacement (Oslender, 2007a). It is important to emphasise the unique nature of these kinds of displacement because in popular discourse, displacement commonly produces the imagery of long distance, which is an exception for many of the displacements that take place in the Northeast ranging from village level to intra-district level.

The relief camp inmates were cramped in unhygienic and unhealthy conditions. Many new born babies and elderly people died of disease and shortage of medicines. A substantial amount of male inmates took to alcoholism, and consequently, the community ran out of elders. The loss was profound because patriarchal communities rely on men of age and experience for leadership. That is especially true during times of crises. The ravages of alcoholism would have major bearings on the community, an aspect that would be discussed later in the paper. A young woman, Sugi Hansda, recounted their experience in the relief camp:

*I don't remember exactly when we fled from our homes. I was a very young child then and have only faint memories. What I do remember clearly was the hardship. Life was very hard there. My father died in the camp. The people living near the camp thought us to be dirty as the camp was a squalid place. Ghrina koresil ama k(They detested us). Passers-by would block their nostrils.*

The hardships went on and in 2010, after more than a decade's stay at the relief camp, they were asked to leave. Each family was given a token amount of INR 50,000 and asked to vacate at short notice, a period that was later changed to one month after

repeated requests by the camp inmates. Kusal Murmu, the village pastor, explained the ordeal. Each family was given a cheque of Rs.50,000 and asked to leave within few days of receiving the cheque. He narrated:

*Kukuror dore amar logot bebohar koresil (We were treated like dogs). Where could we go? We were not animals that could live under an open sky? We begged for a month's time. Fortunately, our request was accepted. Grace of God brought news that a Nepali person was looking to sell off his land nearby.*

As the amount was inadequate to buy an individual plot for each family, Murmu explained that they paired up with another family to pool the resources of the two families together and procure land for homestead. The attempt at recreating a village settlement was done to safeguard security of life. The process was reflective of a “community effort hypothesis”, which meant that survivors of ethnic cleansings tend to stay close together and in regular contact with people of the earlier social settlement, enabling the contemplation of a joint return, bringing safety in numbers and thereby heightening the chances of a collective return (Stefanovic and Loizides, 2011b).

Houses were constructed on the new plot after clearing it of vegetation. Mostly bamboo was used for construction in the beginning, and it was only later that mud and clay houses were built.

### **Incomplete Surrender as Resilience**

Along with their homes, the Adivasis had to leave behind crop fields and cattle. Prior to the displacement, each family had sufficient land for self sustenance. Kusal Murmu explained that his family had to buy only mustard oil back then. The land was fertile and anything could be grown on it. The poor did not have to wander from door to door in search of work as they were compelled to do in present circumstances and none had to starve. However, with time and situation, subsistence farmers and the less well off were reduced to wage labourers searching for work on a daily wage basis.

Resettlement did not mean the disappearance in the desire to go back. The memory of their fields, homes and trees constantly troubled and reminded them of what was lost. For Kusal Murmu, the thought was unbearable at times. He narrated an attempt at reclamation of some part of their lost land as late as 2013. About forty men together decided to plant rubber saplings in a plot near their original village. They worked on the patch for about a week without disturbance. But one day, two young men showed up. They carried arms. They asked the group of forty men to leave immediately. However, Murmu and his group instead of retreating confronted the two young men as they were more in numbers. An altercation ensued. Murmu and his men noticed few more young men at a distance observing them, they were all armed. The group decided to retreat. More than an attempt at returning, the incident was a kind of symbolic resistance. They regarded the act of planting saplings near the old village as an act of resistance.

Defiance became an essential part of life and refusal to surrender an aspect of their resilience. It could be located in the context of the typical encouragement given to returnees of displacement to determine for themselves the potential risks, relying on their own wisdom (Fagen, 2011b). The school teacher, Chandan Murmu, explained their resolve:

*We resist in every possible way. We resist whenever we can. Unfortunately, that is not the case with all communities (like the Bengali Muslims) who have also been at the receiving end.*

Another instance of the resistance is the annual payment of *khajana* (land tax) on the dispossessed lands. The act of paying land tax is symbolic of the true claimants, a way of asserting their rights over the land. However, it is not financially possible for everyone in the community to continuously pay tax on land that was de facto no longer under their occupation. Chandan Murmu is amongst the few who could still afford to pay an annual tax. His official documents like ration card and voter's identity card still carried his old village address. He did not intend to change the old address.

These periodic and consistent acts of resistance are exercised within the context of violence being an unpredictable aspect of life with fear as a constant company. It has crept deep into the psyche, as Chandan Murmu recounted how they could sense trouble at the first glance and how spontaneous violence could be and a small incident was sufficient to trigger violence. They had to be on their vigil for self defence. He recounted how they had spent sleepless days since the doomed night of 1996 when they fled from their home. An unknown fear of violence engulfs them especially during the Council elections.

During the election to the Territorial Council in 2014, the Adivasis were targeted by insurgents in different places. There were about a hundred deaths including infants. Chandan Murmu recounted an incident that occurred in his village during that time:

*It was night time. The miscreants had reached very near the school....They had guns but we chased them away. Our numbers must have scared them. We did not have guns, but bows and arrows.*

The Adivasis drew on their traditional experience in tackling vulnerable situations. One way of doing that was of re-grouping the men and boys around the perimeter of the village in small groups. The women and children are kept at one place as the men stand guard. Chandan Murmu explained that all night vigil was their only security. The community has introduced rules to ensure security. They have made it compulsory for able bodied male above the age of fourteen to offer their services on rotational basis in guarding the village<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Chandan Murmu stated: *In December 2014, I stood guard with my eldest son at one end of the village. We cannot afford any healthy male staying aloof as it's a matter of life and death. Young boys go to school and sit for exams in the mornings after night long vigils.*

The Adivasi's traditionally carry with them knowledge of archery. Young boys are taught to be expert archers. The author had the privilege of seeing young boys practicing archery on tree barks. Everyone in the village is encouraged to learn archery, as the value of such an enterprise is exhibited during the village archery competition held annually. Defensive skills are kept sharp as a collective effort. Although they had crossed a very difficult period in the camps after displacement, they stand prepared ready to face any recurrence of violence. Collective involvement during night vigils, knowledge and use of traditional weaponry and refusal to give up claims on the land is a crucial aspect of their resilience and refusal to surrender.

### **Role of Prayers and Co-Religionists in Building Resilience**

Religious piety helped tide through the hardships in the relief camp because prayers performed in a collective were seen as empowering. Kusal Murmu, the pastor, credited "divine grace" for providing a place for settlement, after being asked to leave at an extremely short notice. We may allude to the work of Rachel Kashena, who in her monograph on narratives of people who had lost their spouses in the Naga-Kuki conflict of Manipur in the early 1990s, had observed the importance of prayers for survivors of ethnic violence. Prayers helped in surrendering difficulties unto God, and as prayers got answered, survivor's belief in them also increased (Kashena, 2017a). Recounting an incident in the camp<sup>5</sup>, Kusal Mumu attributed his community's survival to prayers:

*It was in 2004. The militants had set up a bomb launcher or something similar right next to us in the camp across the wall of the veterinary hospital. They wanted to kill us even in such a condition. The plan failed because the instrument malfunctioned. We were lucky.*

He continued and credited their earnest prayers to God for protection when the launcher failed to create any harm and casualty among his tribe while a similar attack onto the security forces was successful. He was emphatic that prayers to God were their only saving grace. These narratives corroborated the utility of unsuspecting belief for a people during an adversity. The village church constructed post settlement, doubling up as a small community centre for social events, also functioned as a channel for dialogue. During the violence, the Adivasis had to abandon their newly built church after converting to Protestant Christianity from the traditional *Sarna* faith. Another church was thus constructed on a priority basis after resettlement in the new plot of land. It is a neat small structure made of clay and wood; it has a pulpit, wooden table, chair and a speaker. The attendees sit on mats in the floor. Apart from regularly held praying sessions, it came to play an important role in intra village community life. A special mention could be made of the congregation held on the first day of every

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<sup>5</sup> The killings of relief camp inmates are not without precedent in the state of Assam. Monirul Hussain cited an incident at Banhbari, Barpeta district in 1994 when militants not only targeted Na-Asamiya Muslim peasants in "their homes, fields forests, and villages, they even did not spare those who took shelter at the Banhbari relief camp run by the state" (Hussain, 2000).

New Year. Paran Tudu, a surrendered cadre of an armed Adivasi underground group, narrated that everyone is called upon to confess any ill feelings and grudge one may hold towards another... Everything held inside is let out. The implication being that such an exchange on New Year's Day kept the community united by paving the way for strained relations to repair.

Moreover, Bodos, including leaders and elders, visit the Church upon invitation on special occasions. Partaking in jointly held prayers, the Bodo visitors are co-religionists from neighbouring villages. It allows for social interactions and opportunities for both communities to bring out crucial questions and issues. Thereby a space is created for questions that have perturbed the Adivasis since the displacement and its attendant violence.

Chandan Murmu explained the backdrop of that peculiar relationship:

*We visit their churches and they visit ours. We pray together. They also come here to sell pork and other food stuffs on the festive seasons such as Christmas... On the surface, our relations are so cordial. It is then difficult to face the reality... It is difficult for a guest here to notice that a lot is present than meets the eye.*

He further explained:

*I invoke the Lord. He died for all of humanity. Christianity preaches love and compassion for the neighbour. So, I ask them why we can't go back to our own, rightful land. I tell them it was your people who took it all away. I do not say this as a personal accusation. But I ask them, why can't you intervene on behalf of us?<sup>6</sup>*

These questions, however, do not have easy answers and sometimes lead to uncomfortable situations when it is accused that "politics" is being brought up amidst their relations. The Adivasis, on their part, feel the Bodos hesitate to take any steps to change the status quo, conveniently using religion to show shallow solidarities. Kishor Hembrom, a young pastor of the village church, explained the predicament that they are often told such incidents are works of third party. He wondered and once asked if the third party had a surname and identity of its own?

The Adivasis put onus on moral responsibility as they saw it. Their co-religionists are also a part of the ethnic group that had violently displaced them. Owning moral responsibility is different from the question of causal responsibility. In her work on responsibility of groups in ethnic conflicts, Virginia Held examined owning responsibility as an important component for reconciliation. While it is true that varying degrees of moral responsibility exist and not everyone could be held responsible merely for sharing the same ethnic identity, the real power of moral responsibility and its utility

<sup>6</sup> Paran Tudu and Chandan Murmu noted that when congregations are held in the church, the message of peace and solidarity notwithstanding, answers are sought and grievances of the Adivasis expressed.

lies in putting constraints on the unjustifiable actions of co-ethnicities (Held, 2002)

The narratives point towards three aspects that might pave the way for reconciliation in the future at best or maintain a tenuous but enduring peace at the worst. First, social interaction takes place between the two communities in various spheres, including the church pointing at a significant role played by religion. The Adivasis realise the importance of keeping meaningful lines of communication open, and the Bodos also reciprocate to that. Second, the discussions do not reach their desired ends but that does not hinder their occurrence. Third, in spite of uncomfortable silences accompanying searching questions, the construction of an *Other* is tempered by such interactions. The third aspect will be described below in more details. The Adivasis realise that, despite their precarious past, allowing for a reification of social relations would not be in their interest.

### **Resilience and Inter-Community Relations in Taming Potential Violence**

Social interaction between the two communities is not limited to the Church. Being daily wage labourers dependent heavily on the availability of work, the Adivasis go for work in Bodo households. Keeping an in-group/out-group mentality, something that often accompanies an identity based conflict, would not sit well in the daily search for employment (Millar, 2012).

Taking note of the otherwise amicable relations, Chandan Murmu observed that the Bodos have been the best of friends and neighbours with the Adivasis. The Bodos are easy going people but trouble begins when politics starts elsewhere and the impact carries forward. He was emphatic in saying; *Baheror pora hawa aahi gondogul kori diye* (It is the winds from the outside that create chaos). Similarly Biren Kisku, a wage labourer, observed that Bodos are a fair group of people and the Adivasis went for wage work as *hazira* (labourers) to Bodo areas and wage rates were paid as agreed.

Social interactions, especially in the site of the village market, also exist with the Bodos who came to own the Adivasi's homes and fields. Conversations during such encounters veer from normal small talk to jokes on how one had come to kill or chase away the other in the past. Chandan Murmu explained further that those who had taken over their lands and homes are common people induced by the militants in exchange of support. The Bodos have settled for good and even if the issue of land and ownership is broached for discussion they turn away. Thus, a complete breakdown of social relations is thus averted, despite the fact that past grievances and demands for reclamation produce uncomfortable situations and bring conversations to an end.

An important factor that often gets overlooked in prevailing literature on ethnic conflict in the Northeast is intra village inter ethnic amity. At the local level in villages in multi-ethnic places like Assam, people usually have intimate relations cutting across ethnicities, for instance, by virtue of shared work in the agricultural fields, social

intercourses like marriages and fairs, economic relations like markets and other cultural festivities. Hence, the outbreak of violence based on identity is not easily spontaneous. A Bodo family would not suddenly attack an Adivasi or Muslim family, and the same is true the other way round, just because news had reached them of one attacking the other at a different place. When the families in question are neighbours or members of the same village, attacking each other is more improbable. It is the influence of “outside” agents, often external to the village, like militants or radical political activists, who coax and coerce the locals into violent action and reaction. Chandan Murmu termed this phenomenon, in a metaphorical sense, as “winds from the outside”. Dwizen Islary, a Bodo inhabitant of a village neighbouring the Adivasis, narrated the experience usually faced during such times:

*During the disturbance, we were asked by people from outside the area to destroy burn and occupy the lands and houses of our neighbours...How could we do that? They were like family, known to us for a very long time since the time of our ancestors. I think harming them would be a great sin.*

As he explained further, ties and bonds do go beyond immediate kinship where a village is like a family and villagers are known to each other. There is external pressure to break the friendly peaceful relation among the communities living in the village and the trouble brews from such external intrusion. There are accusations of betraying one’s own people suffering elsewhere if villagers did not respond to such external reporting and engage in inter community animosity.

Communities have worked their own system and ways to preserve the peace that pre-exists. At the local level, in the Adivasi village, whenever tensions flared up, including minor incidents, the matter is taken up with local leaders and organisations. During the author’s fieldwork, an incident of altercation followed by threatening with sharp weapons occurred between a young Bodo man and an Adivasi man. The case was taken up by the Adivasis with the local All Bodo Student’s Union (ABSU) activists, and the matter was resolved without violence. In fact, the practice is of taking up such matters with “the other” people, to the detriment of unilateral decisions. The “parent” community is expected to render justice on its erring member and not on a member of any “other community”. Chandan Murmu recollected an incident that illustrated the particular understanding that had developed between the two communities when two young men created trouble a few years back and villagers apprehended these people. None was assaulted or beaten but kept tied to a post near the school and elders from their community were called to and the young men were handed over to the elders who had come. Reprimanding the youths for their fault was the responsibility of the community elders. This step has helped in building good faith and maintains the calmness. The simple rules keep minor incidents from magnifying and potentially turning violent. A cautious approach is followed by the Adivasis and individual instantaneous reaction is discouraged.

Apart from the narrative of interactions mentioned above, the two community's relations interestingly revolve around the issue of locally brewed alcohol. Due to the far reaching influence of Protestant Christianity, many villages around the Adivasi village have a Spartan attitude towards any form of intoxication. The sentiment of alcohol as a social evil runs across communities, Bodo and Adivasi, who are Protestants by faith. Chandan Murmu explained the reason behind the opposition to any form of intoxication:

*We are at the bottom rung of society. How can we risk our trifle well being by drinking, even if it's for enjoyment? When someone earns Rs 200 for a day's labour and spends almost all of that money on alcohol, how can he survive? No one will go to work, families will get ruptured. We are a community who have fought ethnic persecution, state apathy and historical marginalisation. We have to be vigilant regarding these destructive habits. Many families and lives have been already destroyed in front of my eyes because of alcohol.*

He problematised drinking among the Adivasi community in general and argued that for a long time, drinking has been a bane for the community. The stereotypical image of the Adivasi after a hard day's toil finally spending his hard earned money on drinks in the evening is but a sad reality. Ages of servitude have left the Adivasi people ill equipped to to spend and invest their hard earned money wisely. Entrepreneurial capacity is found wanting among the Adivasis. One is happy to be working under a *master* remain contented at the prospect of a little money. For people surviving on wage income with no guarantee of two square meals a day, therefore can ill afford to waste their money on drinks. Children and family tend to be vulnerable in such conditions.

Because of these concerns, the Adivasis have campaigned against alcoholism at the local level. The memory of losing many men to alcohol addiction in the relief camp was also important in these anti-alcoholism drives.

The drives against alcohol become complicated when it comes to Bodo households selling alcohol in the neighbourhood. In a village very near to that of the Adivasis, a few Hindu Bodo families brew alcohol and sell it for a living. The Adivasis for all practical purposes cannot ask them to stop brewing and selling their traditional beverage. Their attempts are instead directed at their own community. They ask, and sometimes coerce as the needs arise, their community people to stay away from alcohol and alcohol selling households. On one occasion, when an Adivasi household started brewing alcohol, the community elders immediately forced a shutdown of that business. As far as livelihood is concerned, the essence is that one family's livelihood should not become the cause of destruction of six other families. A particular concern however arises when an Adivasi drinks at an alcohol selling Bodo household. The Adivasis do not want any chances at risking, for instance, a drunken brawl, because such incidents have the potential to deteriorate into bigger tensions and even violence.

The campaign against alcohol is also pertinent because often it is the women of the household who brew and serve alcohol to the customers. This is true of both the communities. The customers are mostly men who sit in groups and drink at the seller's house itself. The community elders are apprehensive of crimes of a sexual nature taking place in such settings. Gendered notions of honour and vulnerability also influence the hard-line approach. Any form of conflict arising from a trivial drunken brawl or serious accusations of molestations is apparently prevented by these campaigns.

The Adivasis, by engaging in a social interaction with the Bodos through the church, have added to resilience because it prevents the further solidifying of social relations and keeps the minimum lines of communication open. Co-existence with the Bodos is made smoother despite mutual insecurities and suspicions. Similarly, the self-driven campaigns against alcoholism are another instance of a subtle resilience as inter-ethnic tensions are sought to be prevented before occurrence, even from an incident of drunken rage. The financial and health concerns of the Adivasis are also safeguarded from further deterioration brought about by alcoholism.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The short sighted policies of the post-colonial state along with the failure of the Assamese ruling class to take the Bodo assertions in confidence made the Bodo agitation take a violent turn in the late 1980s and the following decade, and as identity increasingly became tied to an exclusive idea of territorial indigeneity, the fall-out of political violence was on communities like the Adivasis and Bengal origin Muslims (also termed Na-Asamiya/Neo-Assamese, and more recently Miya, reclamation of a term that carried pejorative connotations). The Third Peace Accord of 27<sup>th</sup> January 2020 has put the question of a separate Bodo homeland in the backburner for the time being, but it had also elicited new fears among communities that are relatively politically marginalised.

Most narratives that the paper had documented were self-explanatory. The author did not or could not feel the need to minutely deconstruct or theorise the Adivasis lived experience, as that would have obstructed the objective of exploring the human face of resilience in displacement. The study does not claim that resilience is a character of all displaced groups fleeing ethnic violence, but is an attempt at reaching out to varied experiences of IDPs and refugees, without an essentialisation and generalisation of their experiences. The Adivasis after displacement evoked resilience in both symbolic and material ways. Faith in their prayers, possession of the original address in their identity cards, night vigils and anti-alcohol campaigns, to cite a few instances, have kept them afloat in the most difficult times. Resilience of a subtler nature, for instance, co-existing with the Bodo community through church dialogues and taming potential violence and thereby avoiding the likelihood of petty quarrels turning into greater frictions or conflicts, are both prudential and foresighted.

Although the study had focused on the experience of a displaced Adivasi community among many others in the region, the repercussions of violence are felt by multiple communities. During the author's fieldwork, a Bodo man recounted about the time when his household ran out of food essentials during the violence and had to survive only on pulses for a month. He recounted the time when he lived in fear at the thought of his young high school going son being recruited by militants. In fact, in the aftermath of violence, "spaces of terror" are created (Oslender, 2007b). An instance of hysteria generated by a rumour during the author's fieldwork would perhaps illustrate the point. A targeted vaccination drive in schools by the state government was resisted as it was feared to be a ploy to inject students of non-Bodo communities with fatal diseases. Scared parents rushed to the schools reaching for their wards and confronted teachers, principals and even security forces who were brought for law and order purposes. The author and his fellow colleagues were asked by curious and scared people who pointed their hands at laptop bags and asked whether those were meant for keeping things used for inoculation. Upon approaching a school teacher, he remarked that the teachers were helpless in the attempt to dispel the fear mongering, as that would amount to taking sides and risks in the unlikely but probable event of any child falling sick due to other reasons.

Sanjib Barua (2005) theorises that Northeast as a space is characterised as manifesting "durable disorder" through various low intensity and sustained conflicts involving both state and non state agents, where one finds co-existence, resilience and sometimes, selective forgetting by survivors of political (e.g. ethnic) violence, as a powerful way of not only moving towards a resolution, but also reconciliation. Studies on tragedies like the massacre near Nellie in Assam (1983) and the Naga-Kuki clashes (1992-93) for example have taken a constructive approach as to not only visualise what had been lost, but also at the same time, to bridge over their intractable nature (Kashena, 2017b; Kimura, 2013).

However the volatility accompanied by contested political developments make reconciliation a challenging prospect in the BTR. The Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) model which goes beyond the realm of conflict resolution is ideally suited for protracted violence based on a racial, communal or ethnic nature. However, it does not have a precedent in India officially, and the necessary groundwork of confidence building is weak in the BTR, an important reason being the under-representation of the Adivasis (and other non-Bodo groups) in the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC). A positive aspect, however, is the exteriority of the violence that the Adivasis and Bodos ascribed to. The understanding of violence as "having arrived here" helps in the repairing of social relations post the worst phase(s). Locating problems outside the socio-political boundaries of villages has been a defining factor in the success of the TRC of Peru that dealt with the aftermath of an armed insurgency and state repression of the 1980s and 1990s (Theidon, 2006). Chandan Murmu's "winds from outside" metaphor and Dwizen Islary's bewilderment at the pressure to engage in violence with his neighbour could in the future provide a way that would lead to a genuine rapprochement between the two communities and transcend the politically motivated violence.

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OKDISCD

## Deontology to Utilitarianism: The Conundrum of Food Security and Poverty in India

Kajori Bhatnagar<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Food security is achieved when people have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. There are four aspects to food security: food availability, access to food, food utilisation and stability. In order to assure a community to have security of food, it must be assured that there is enough availability of food, accessibility to the same to remain healthy (including a sufficiently diverse diet that provides adequate levels of micronutrients) and persistence of such conditions in future. This issue of food security has come under deliberation recently due to Covid-19 situation. The foundation of protection of right to food as fundamental right has been laid down in Indian Constitution as per International Obligations which in turn paved ways for various policies that ensure food protection to destitute citizens such as National Food Security Act and the Mid-Day Meal scheme. The apparent leakages in TPDS (Targeted Public Distribution System) system and the inaction of people are bound to create hassles in full expression of right to food in trying times of COVID-19.*

In 2006, a policy brief was prepared by Food and Agriculture Organization, which said that food security is achieved when people have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.<sup>2</sup> There are four aspects to food security: food availability, access to food, food utilisation and stability.<sup>3</sup> In order to assure a community to have security of food, it must be assured that there is enough availability of food, accessibility to the same to remain healthy (including a sufficiently diverse diet that provides adequate levels of micronutrients) and continuance of such conditions

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<sup>2</sup> Mervyn Piesse, Hunger Amid Abundance: The Indian Food Security Enigma, Strategic Analysis Paper, available at: <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Hunger-Amid-Abundance-The-Indian-Food-Security-Enigma.pdf> (last visited on June 13, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

in future. This concept of food security is further argued in recent times of Covid-19 situation, where the people have faced concerns of food security<sup>4</sup> due to loss of accessibility.

### The Ongoing Concerns of Food Security

India has a significant history of famines<sup>5</sup>, suggesting huge disparity between the entitled and the deprived. A similar notion of the same has been highlighted by Amartya Sen in his book *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*.<sup>6</sup> He highlighted the idea of entitlement and deprivation in terms of practice followed by colonial masters in 1943 Bengal Famine. In his book he explained the idea of entitlement<sup>7</sup> approach and as to how the interrelationships between people at all levels affect the notion of assuring food security. It could be understood as co-relation between generation of income and purchasing power of people. At the same time as to what would constitute income. For instance, a barber owns his labour power and some specialized skill, neither of which he can eat, and he has to sell his hairdressing service to earn an income to buy food. His entitlement to food may collapse even without any change in food availability if for any reason the demand for hairdressing collapses and if he fails to find suitable job or any social security benefit. Similarly, a craftsman producing, say, sandals may have his food entitlement compacted if the demand for sandals falls sharply, or if the supply of leather becomes scarce, and starvation may occur with food availability in the economy unchanged. A general labourer must earn his income by selling his labour power (or through social security benefit) before he can establish his command over food in a free-market economy. Unemployment without public support will make him starve. A sharp change in the relative prices of sandals, or haircuts, or labour power (i.e., wages) vis-à-vis food can make the food entitlements of the respective group fall below the starvation level,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> India experienced seven major drought periods (1876–1882, 1895–1900, 1908–1924, 1937–1945, 1982–1990, 1997–2004, and 2011–2015) based on severity-area-duration analysis of reconstructed soil moisture. Out of six major famines (1873–74, 1876, 1877, 1896–97, 1899, and 1943) that occurred during 1870–2016, five are linked to soil moisture drought, and one (1943) was not. The three most deadly droughts (1877, 1896, and 1899) were linked with the positive phase of El Niño–Southern Oscillation. Five major droughts were not linked with famine, and three of those five non-famine droughts occurred after Indian independence in 1947.

<sup>6</sup> Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983, available at: <https://www.prismaweb.org/nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Poverty-an821981.pdf> (last visited on June 13, 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Entitlement for the purposes of this paper has been defined in terms of ownership rights. There are other types of rights of use that do not involve ownership as such, but which have the effect of guaranteeing use, nevertheless. What we can eat depends upon what food we are able to acquire. The mere presence of food in the economy or in the market does not entitle a person to consume it. In each social structure, giving the prevailing legal, political and economic arrangements, a person can establish command over some alternative commodity bundles (any one bundle of which he or she can choose to consume). These bundles could be extensive or very limited and what a person can consume will be directly dependent upon what these bundles are. The set of alternative bundles of commodities over which a person can establish such command will be referred to as this person's entitlements.<sup>9</sup> Amartya Sen & Jean Dreze, *The Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze Omnibus* (Oxford University Press) (2006).

thereby establishing that the totality of food entitlements is governed as per the ability of the person to acquire enough food to avoid starvation, and that the food supply is only one influence among many affecting his entitlement relations.

### **Food Security under Constitutional Framework**

The foundation of protection of right to food as fundamental right has been laid down in Indian Constitution as per the international obligations.<sup>8</sup> The Supreme Court has held that the right to life (Article 21) is to be interpreted as including the right to food and therefore the right to be free from hunger and starvation.<sup>9</sup> The Court stated that the case highlighted the breakdown of the food public distribution system and the inadequacy of drought relief efforts at that point of time. The Supreme Court therefore directed the Government “to see that the poor and the destitute and the weaker sections of the society do not suffer from hunger and starvation” and to provide food to disadvantaged groups including “destitute women, destitute men who are in danger of starvation, pregnant and lactating women and destitute children, especially in cases where they or members of their family do not have sufficient funds to provide food for them.”<sup>10</sup> The Court also directed the Government to identify and include people who are living in poverty in its food-based schemes, and confirmed that the Government would be held responsible for hunger and starvation.<sup>11</sup> The Court has also said that the deprivation of the right to livelihood can be challenged as a violation of the right to life guaranteed by article 21 of the Constitution.<sup>12</sup>

However, when the livelihood is itself under stress, the concerns of food security themselves become questionable. A utilitarian approach demands that maximum people are benefited out of policy measures while the idea of deontology that takes inspiration from Kantian view emphasises upon the emotional correctness of a situation. However, in Indian context the issue is of large unregulated and unorganised sector who have lost their livelihood to sudden lockdown and hence are predicted to fall below poverty line.

### **The Conundrum between Food Security and Food Accessibility**

Deontological ethics refer to an ethics system that judges whether an action is right or wrong based on moral ethics instead to see the consequences of the action. However,

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<sup>8</sup> People’s Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India & Others, 2001, Supreme Court, Writ Petition (civil) 196/2001

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> India on the Brink of Hunger Crisis during COVID-19 Pandemic, International Commission of Jurists, available at: <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/India-Right-to-Food-COVID19-ENG.pdf> (Last visited on June 14,2020)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

this philosophy is tested in real world, when it becomes challenging to comply with it. What happens when one has to choose between two evils? What happens when one can't be objective? What happens when the situation is not black and white? On the other hand, utilitarian ethics state that a course of action should be taken by considering the most positive outcome. This ethics system is more accurate when it comes to addressing complicated situations, in which solutions are not as trivial.<sup>13</sup> Its name comes from the word *deon*, meaning duty, in Greek. One of the aspects of the same is personhood that provides a set of rights and responsibilities from an ethical point of view, since every person has intrinsic integrity, something that is important to each and every person and is held in equal measure. This integrity induces an ethical 'line in the sand' that prohibits us from behaving either towards other individuals or towards ourselves in such ways (because we still have integrity). Above all, Kant argues that a person can never be regarded merely as 'a means to an end' (never as a 'resource').

Most deontologists claim there are two distinct forms of ethical obligations, perfect and imperfect duties. A perfect responsibility is inflexible. An example of the same can be suggested as "Do not kill innocent people". The middle-ground is not there. It has to be observed as it is. However, an imperfect duty entails to situations like "think about the world around you". This refers to situations with a generic purview where one could be involved in multitude of things, but at the same time be an observant to the things around. For deontologists, it is not an ethical excuse to comply with the laws of self-interest because it can lead to better outcomes, or it makes one happy. It is the respect for the moral law itself that ought to inspire one. Deontologists demand that one obeys universal rules that one offers to oneself. These laws must be consistent with reason and must be logically consistent and not give rise to contradictions. Any system involving a clear set of rules is a form of deontology. For instance, ten commandments and universal declaration of human rights. They are followed as such without any dispute from any side.

Jeremy Bentham, the founder of Utilitarianism, defined utility as the aggregate pleasure after deducting suffering of all involved in any action. However, the downfall of this ethics system is not being justice oriented. As instances of ethical dilemma, one could easily analyse present situation.<sup>14</sup> To safeguard livelihood of citizens, it was thought to be valid to compromise on health. This kind of compromise on health would have still been there considering loss of life due to hunger.<sup>15</sup> Further dilemmas are in providing for people who lost their jobs, the initial order of the government to pay the employees was questioned by the court.

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<sup>13</sup> Carla Gabriela Guzman, Deontology vs Utilitarianism, The eternal battle, available at: <https://sites.psu.edu/psy533buban/2016/02/05/103-deontology-vs-utilitarianism-the-eternal-battle> (Last visited on June 15, 2020)

<sup>14</sup> Id.

<sup>15</sup> Id.

Almost all economic activity has been choked off by the lockdown. This led to the widespread loss of jobs and jobs for migrant workers and the vulnerable<sup>16</sup> in urban areas. The Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy's estimates showed that unemployment rose from 8.4% in mid-March to 23% in the first week of April 2020. In urban areas, unemployment as of April 5, 2020 increased to 30.9%. For informal workers and the poor, who lead precarious lives faced with hunger and malnutrition, the shutdown had triggered untold suffering. Using social safety nets systematically to sustain their lives with food and cash is the best way to resolve this urgent need. The informal workers in generality are above poverty line and hence are not covered in any social security schemes<sup>17</sup>. But owing to the fact that these people have lost their jobs or are desked the imminence of facing food security issues is pertinent.

Ethical dilemmas are not easy to solve. Ethics depend on a moral framework. One makes decisions based on what one believe is right and what is best for self, but not necessarily for everyone else. Being human is part of the dilemma. That is precisely why the utilitarian theory comes into picture signifying maximum good to maximum number. But here the decision shall be based upon the futuristic approach where maximum number would be benefited by proactive steps to assure social security nets that would ultimately affect the food security setups.

### **The Cyclic Supply Chain Trouble**

According to the latest released budget reports, the two departments i) Food and Public Distribution, and (ii) Consumer Affairs, that come under the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution have relayed reports regarding food supply

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<sup>16</sup> In general vulnerability at the individual level can be thought in terms of the uncertainty in the outcomes of different indicators such as income and consumption that the individual faces in the future. When it comes to conceptualizing vulnerability, we start with some broad characteristics that we expect a reasonable vulnerability measure to satisfy. A measure of vulnerability has to be an ex-ante measure in the sense it should inform us about potential deprivations in the future. A reasonable measure of vulnerability thus must focus on downside risk. In other words, we are interested in the shortfalls (from a given a reference point) rather than the gains. Vulnerability is an individual specific concept since each individual views risk differently and therefore same shortfalls in income may reflect different levels of vulnerability. long with other dimensions of well-being such as health. Individuals may be vulnerable if they are unable to maintain in the future a certain minimum standard of living which may be different from the poverty line. The current standard of living, especially if it is low, also may indicate the severity of a future fall into poverty. In other words, individuals with low current standard of living may suffer more severely from a downturn in the future than someone with a higher current standard of living. Just pegging vulnerability to current standard of living, however, would make it very individualistic, and we may end up declaring a person whose annual income may reduce from million dollars to half a million as more vulnerable compared to one whose may decrease from \$300 to \$200. Dutta, I., Foster, J., Mishra, A., 2011. On measuring vulnerability to poverty. *Social Choice and Welfare* 37, 743–761. doi:10.1007/s00355-011-0570-1

<sup>17</sup> The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines Social Security as “the security that society furnishes through appropriate organization against certain risks to which its members are perennially exposed. These risks are essentially contingencies against which an individual of small means cannot effectively provide by his own ability or foresight alone or even in private combination with his fellows. The mechanics of social security therefore consists in counteracting the blind injustice of nature and economic activities by rational planned justice with a touch of benevolence to temper it.” International Labour Organisation, *Facts on Social Security*, (Oct 6, 2021, 12:57 am), [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/documents/publication/wcms\\_067588.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/documents/publication/wcms_067588.pdf).

systems. The former department is responsible for ensuring food security through procurement, storage, and distribution of food grains, and for regulating the sugar sector.<sup>18</sup> In 2020-21, the Department had been allocated Rs 1,22,235 crore (98% of the Ministry's allocation). This is 6% higher than the revised estimate of 2019-20. Further the Department of Consumer Affairs that is responsible for spreading awareness among consumers about their rights, protecting their interests, implementing standards, and preventing black marketing has been allocated Rs 2,300 crore, which is 12% higher than the revised estimate of 2019-20. However, considering the current scenarios, the actual number of people affected (the people who have lost their means of livelihood) cannot be determined.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these initiatives, the PDS that has been in praxis for a long time is itself a reason of delay in precise allocation of resources. The TPDS, through which food grains are distributed at subsidised prices, seeks to provide food security to people below the poverty line.<sup>20</sup> Over the years, while the spending on food subsidy has increased, the ratio of people below the poverty line has decreased from 54.9% in 1973-74 to 21.9% in 2011-12. The FCI (Food Corporation of India) and state agencies procure food grains from farmers at the government notified Minimum Support Prices (MSPs). These food grains are provided to the economically weaker sections at subsidised prices through fair price shops under the public distribution system. The central and state governments provide food grains to beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act, 2013 as well as certain other welfare schemes such as the Mid-Day Meal scheme.<sup>21</sup>

The major defect in TPDS are leakages. Leakages refer to food grains not reaching intended beneficiaries. According to the 2011 data, leakages in PDS were estimated to be 46.7%.

Leakages are broadly categorised into three types, namely: (i) pilferage or damage during transportation of food grains, (ii) diversion to non-beneficiaries at fair price shops through issue of ghost cards, and (iii) exclusion of people entitled to food grains but who are not in the beneficiary list. At the same time there are certain exclusion and inclusion errors at the time of distribution. The exclusion errors occur when entitled beneficiaries do not get food grains. It refers to the percentage of poor households that are entitled to but do not have PDS cards. These errors have declined from 55% in 2004-05 to 41% in 2011-12. While inclusion errors occur when those that are ineligible get undue benefits. Inclusion errors increased from 29% in 2004-05 to 37% in 2011-12.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Vatsal Khullar, Food Security In India, PRS Legislative Research, available at: <https://www.prsindia.org/theprsblog/food-security-india> (Last Visited on June 14, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Id.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Demand for Grants 2020-21 Analysis: Food and Public Distribution, PRS Legislative Research, available at: [https://www.prsindia.org/sites/default/files/budget\\_files/DFG%20Analysis%20-](https://www.prsindia.org/sites/default/files/budget_files/DFG%20Analysis%20-) (Last visited on June 15, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

**Leakages in PDS for Wheat and Rice (in lakh tonnes)**

State/UT	Total consumption from PDS	Offtake (2011-12)	Leakage	% Leakage
Andhra Pradesh	36.1	40.7	4.6	11.30%
Arunachal Pradesh	0.8	1	0.2	20.00%
Assam	9.5	24.4	14.9	61.10%
Bihar	11.3	36.2	24.9	68.80%
Chhattisgarh	16.7	16.7	0	0.00%
Goa	0.4	0.8	0.4	50.00%
Gujarat	4.4	15.7	11.3	72.00%
Haryana	2.2	7.3	5.1	69.90%
Himachal Pradesh	4.9	6.3	1.4	22.20%
Jammu and Kashmir	8.8	9.1	0.3	3.30%
Jharkhand	3.1	12.4	9.3	75.00%
Karnataka	16.2	30.1	13.9	46.20%
Kerala	11.4	20.1	8.7	43.30%
Madhya Pradesh	15.5	30.7	15.2	49.50%
Maharashtra	19.3	42.7	23.4	54.80%
Manipur	0	2	2	100.00%
Meghalaya	0.8	2.5	1.7	68.00%
Mizoram	0.9	1.1	0.2	18.20%
Nagaland	0.1	2	1.9	95.00%
Odisha	15.4	24.4	9	36.90%
Punjab	3.4	8.7	5.3	60.90%
Rajasthan	10.1	29.8	19.7	66.10%
Sikkim	N/A	N/A	-	-
Tamil Nadu	39.5	45	5.5	12.20%
Tripura	2.7	3.3	0.6	18.20%
Uttar Pradesh	43.2	82.9	39.7	47.90%
Uttarakhand	4.6	6.6	2	30.30%
West Bengal	13.4	43.9	30.5	69.50%
Total	295.5	554.5	259	46.70%

Note: Data from National Sample Survey 2011-12.<sup>23</sup>

Declining exclusion errors and increasing inclusion errors are due to two reasons. First, increase in the coverage of TPDS has reduced the proportion of poor who do not have access to PDS cards. Second, despite a decline in poverty rate, non-poor are still identified as poor by the government thus allowing them to continue using their PDS cards. However, this recognition may still suffer due strain due to increase in number of

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

people who will not have cards but will be without food or basic minimum necessities. Along with these errors, there are two more challenges of PDS in the form of fair price shops and storage of grains in states. The Standing Committee on Food, Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution (2017) has recommended increasing the procurements undertaken by states and reducing the expenditure on centralised procurement by the FCI. They noted that this would drastically reduce the transportation cost borne by the government as states would distribute the food grains to the targeted population within their respective states. As of December 2019, only 17 states have adopted decentralised procurement.<sup>24</sup> The fair price Shops are licensed ration shops which provide food grains under the public distribution system. They may also sell certain other goods in some states. It has been observed by various experts and the Ministry that the margins on which the Fair Price Shops operate are low. Further, in the absence of economic viability, there may be cases where the dealer resorts to unfair practices.

### **The Issues and Suggested Measures to deal with Food Security**

The identification of target households, modernization of the delivery system, and effective monitoring of the food security programme are the primary areas that need attention, according to a report by the National Council of Applied Economic Research. Miss-identification has been a concern in the country for the past decade, preventing the successful implementation of the PDS. To address it, a report by the Planning Commission (GOI2005) and a previous study by the NCAER (Kumar 2010) have suggested that the government do away with the income–expenditure criterion used to identify eligible beneficiaries.<sup>25</sup>

The suggested measures can be further understood on basis of three perspectives namely:

1. **Identification of targeted households:** This necessitates state or region-specific identification systems, as each location has its unique set of needs. Biases and prejudices based on caste, creed, religion, and other factors must be avoided when conducting these surveys.<sup>26</sup>
2. **Focus on improvement of efficiency in PDS functioning:** The PDS program's effectiveness is also dependent on the use of new techniques in its operation. These might be obtained through the distribution of meal coupons, which could be used to prevent leakages at the FPS level. Village camps could be used to distribute a set quantity of vouchers. Village panchayats could play an important role in this. When collecting their monthly quota of food grain, the beneficiaries can swap one coupon. On the coupons, their entitlement and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Evaluation Study of Targeted Public Distribution System in Selected States (2015), <https://dfpd.gov.in/TPDS>.

<sup>26</sup> Id. at 96.

the actual issue price of grains should be indicated explicitly. Even though the ration cards have been digitised, it is recommended that they be distributed based on biometric analysis to reduce red tapism.<sup>27</sup>

The Indian government's Department of Food has decided to operate a pilot programme in at least one district of each state, installing computerised weighing equipment and only delivering food grain to households whose biometric information has been verified. In that circumstance, the Aadhar number might become the ration cardholders' unique identifier. However, in a few states, such as Uttar Pradesh, the percentage of people enrolled in Aadhar is still very low. It is critical to complete the Aadhar enrolment process, as well as the gathering and storage of biometric information from cardholders, to build and utilise electronic weighing devices.<sup>28</sup>

Another issue is recipients' lack of knowledge about their entitlements and the issue price. At all FPSs, display boards with accurate information about entitlement, food grain availability, and issue price should be kept up to date. Beneficiaries must be able to read information published in their native language. In addition to those put up at FPSs, respondents proposed that display boards be erected at key locations in the village, such as the local Panchayat Bhawan and near schools, during our field survey. Because many PDS recipients are illiterate, they may be unable to read the information on the display board. As a result, information about the PDS can be distributed through frequent awareness campaigns sponsored by NGOs and government officials in villages. All states may adopt a scheme to send an SMS to beneficiaries at the beginning of the month regarding their entitlement and the exact price to be paid at the FPS.<sup>29</sup>

1. **Having an effective monitoring mechanism:** Adopting the above-mentioned steps to enhance the PDS's performance would only be beneficial if they are closely monitored. Many people have issues with the current system of state monitoring, regardless of how well or how poorly a state performs. This could be achieved by regular inspection, proper budget allocation for monitoring mechanisms and revamping of village and urban vigilance committees.<sup>30</sup>

### The Denouement

The substantial asset that a person owns is his or her ability to work, i.e., labour power. If a person owns his or her ability to work, i.e., labour power and fails to secure employment, then the means of acquiring food (e.g., by getting a job, earning a wage, and buying food with this income) fails. If, in addition, the laws of the land

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<sup>27</sup> Id. at 97.

<sup>28</sup> Id at 97.

<sup>29</sup> Id at 98.

<sup>30</sup> Id at 100.

do not provide any social security arrangements, e.g., unemployment insurance, the person will, under these circumstances, fail to secure the means of subsistence. This can further result in serious deprivation-possibly even starvation death. In seeking a remedy to this problem of extreme vulnerability, it is natural to turn towards reform of the legal system, so that rights of social security can be made to stand as guarantees of minimal protection and survival.

It is necessary that a holistic approach is given to food security to assure proper food accessibility to deal with the after effect of pandemic. The initial issue is of market supply of food, and this is seen as a production feature. Fortunately, India is self sufficient in food grains owing to the Green Revolution. Yet, in terms of sustaining production, the contributions of farmers cannot be taken for granted. The supply chains were established which consequently that led to good procurement, but distribution was still affected as people lacked basic resources of accessibility.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic's urgency and scarcity, new interactions and tensions have emerged within normative ethical theory. Utilitarianism, deontology, and autonomy all have a place in Western ethics, but they are mutually exclusive. Our public distribution systems, which struggle to fulfil their duty to provide the best possible care, are manifestations of the theoretical tension. Utilitarianism often rules government decision-making when it comes to public distribution systems when times are tough. As important as the maximisation principle is in these situations, relying solely on it can lead to unintended consequences and moral failure if other ethical frameworks that protect human dignity, equitable resource distribution, and stakeholder autonomy aren't used to check it. In order to ensure proportionate and equitable decision making, utilitarianism must be buttressed by the principles of deontology and autonomy. This is because scarce life-sustaining resources must be allocated responsibly.<sup>31</sup>

The existing job insecurities in India and the layoffs that have taken place for over seven months of lockdown have impacted consumerism in India drastically. To address this issue, it was thought that employment shall be imparted through MNREGA schemes. But the policy suffered at various levels. Firstly, the 100 days' work guarantee would not be sufficient to deal with the ongoing work crisis. Secondly, the migrants who have travelled back to their villages may not be skilled to do the work so done under this scheme. This disability may be due to lack of knowledge of the works so required to be done or certain administrative defaults such as not having MNREGA job cards. It has been suggested that further investment in already existing infrastructure of the existing scheme to cater to removal of 100 days of work requirement to unlimited work. Also, it has been suggested that full minimum wages in cash, as well as dry rations, to be paid to workers within seven days rather than the current 15-day limit, so that the scheme can meet the immediate needs of people. A similar kind of employment

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<sup>31</sup> S,Dale. (2020) "Utilitarianism in Crisis", *Voices in Bioethics*, 6. doi: 10.7916/vib.v6i.6082.

scheme has been suggested by economists at urban level considering the loss of jobs in most of the urban holdings.

At this juncture it is imperative that cycle of unemployment, food insecurity and accessibility is broken. This could be achieved by bringing in more labour-intensive policies and creation of social security setups. For a conducive welfare-oriented growth of the country, there shall not be disguised hunger, involuntary unemployment and forced insecurity.

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OKDISCD

## Calculating the Active Aging Index of Guwahati

Amarjyoti Sarma<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*The Active Ageing Index is a tool utilized by UNECE (UNECE, 2012) to quantify the present and future prospect of an elderly or senior citizen, to age actively in a nation. This tool is used exclusively for measuring the Active Ageing prospects of the nations of the European Union. The Index is prepared based on cross-sectional studies of senior citizens across 22 parameters. The index helps a nation identify the key areas of weaknesses in its goal of attaining Sustainable Development (WHO) of senior citizens, which aims to create an enabling environment for the senior citizens, based on their right to equal opportunity and equal participation in society. India is a signatory to all these instruments and is obliged to create such an environment. The purpose of this paper is to find out the prospective of Active Ageing (WHO, 2002) in Guwahati, as an experiment, to determine whether Active Ageing Index can be used at a micro level within India and further determine the areas, which may need policy intervention in this region.*

### The Phenomenon of Ageing

Everyone, who is born, will grow old. Ageing is a natural insecurity. Ageing brings changes to the functioning, cognitive ability, thought process, and way of life of a person. The organs of the human body become less efficient with age. This condition is called Frailty (Lunenfeld & Straton, 2013). People need support and care to sustain their life at this stage. This need is physical as well as emotional.

It is not essential that ageing has to be excruciating phase of human life. Planning and support from society can make it a worthwhile experience. Man, being a social animal, should be able to expect that society will look after him at his vulnerable phase. Social security is one of the principal rationales for the development of society. Laws are nothing but a medium that further the various interests of the members of society. Social security and inter-generational parity are two interests that need to be coordinated. However, the society and the family structure have evolved and this harmony is not maintained anymore. Therefore, the law has to interfere and re-establish the balance.

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Though many laws and policies have been made at various levels, the state of senior citizens is not improving. Support for senior citizens within the family can no longer be assumed. Often they are found to be ignored, ill-treated and discriminated against.

The world is undergoing a distinctive and irreversible change in the form of a demographic transformation. This shift has resulted in a, hitherto unparalleled, growth in the number of older persons, globally. While the fertility rates are declining across countries, life expectancy is increasing. This results in a swell in the number of aged persons in society. The number of senior citizens is predicted to be twice as that of the number of children, within the period between 2007 and 2050. The actual enhancement in their population will be more than triple. It is expected to reach two billion by 2050. The number of persons, aged over eighty, is likely to increase four times to 400 million. (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2017)

Though, India started working in this area from 1999 and brought many policies, the situation of senior citizens hasn't improved. Even after more than a decade of passing The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, the problems of our senior citizens seem to be on the rise.

The World Health Assembly has formulated a Global Strategy and a Plan of Action on Aging and Health. The purpose of this approach is to form an integrated, indivisible set of global priorities for sustainable development. The plan of action starts from a preliminary assumption that ageing is considered a valuable, though often challenging, progression. A paradigm shift in one's approach would be necessary to make ageing an optimistic and pleasing phase of life. There is a necessity to recognize the rights of senior citizens and facilitate them to thrive in the multifarious, ever-changing, and unpredictable nature of society. There is a need to nurture the capacity of senior citizens to contribute to society, without letting their age pose any hurdle in such realization. The policy laid down two goals to be achieved within the period between 2016 to 2020. This period is for setting up the stage in preparation for the Decade of Healthy Aging, that is, 2020 to 2030. The goals require countries to utilize these five years to (i) create evidence-based action to maximize the functional ability of each senior citizen and (ii) establish evidence and alliances necessary to support a Decade of Healthy Aging from 2020 to 2030 (WHO, 2016).

A gradual movement towards a distinct acknowledgement of the rights of senior citizens is manifest in international efforts. The confirmatory action towards senior citizens is no longer based on the needs of senior citizens but based on the recognition of their entitlement under their right to equality in opportunity and participation. Senior citizens are no longer seen as inert recipients of state generosity but as a marginalized class within the society, who have been deprived of their basic human rights. The echo of this transformation can be felt in the Indian legal framework, too. Laws and Policies have been put in place to ensure the protection of the rights of senior citizens in India.

However, a perusal of the available data on the conditions of senior citizens in India revealed a conspicuous discrepancy. Basic data on the indicators associated with the problem of population ageing are missing. The vast available data relies on the Decadal Census, which was never calibrated to identify the problems of ageing. There is a lack of macroscopic data specifically related to the conditions of senior citizens. There are no longitudinal studies on the phenomenon of ageing in India or on the indicators of population ageing.

India is yet to adopt or develop a formal mechanism to study the problem of the population ageing or to generate a knowledge base for the future development of the law and policy in this area. Where the developed nations have moved towards an inclusive model for supporting its senior citizens and have developed appropriate tools for constant evaluation of their issues, India is still following a need-based model without any formal mechanism to measure the magnitude of the issue or the progress made in addressing them.

As already stated, one of the strategic objectives laid down by the World Health Assembly, to achieve its target of evidence-based action to maximize the functional ability of every senior citizen, was to develop research and monitoring of healthy ageing in every nation. The five years, between 2016 to 2020, was earmarked for the nations to build up its knowledge base in preparation for The Decade of Healthy Aging, to be celebrated from 2020-2030. Though piecemeal laws and policies have been made in India, a device to scrutinize the evidence-based action or research in this field has not been put into place.

The European Nations has developed the Active Ageing Index and has been using it to monitor their progress, since 2008 (UNECE, 2012). This Index is constantly upgraded to yield better and more accurate results. The advantage of this index is that it is specifically developed to analyze the situation of senior citizens. It uses uniform parameters for objective evaluation of the indicators of the condition of the ageing population and this not only allows monitoring of the progress made by the nations but also for comparing their mutual development and make policies for further development. It can identify the areas of weaknesses in the policies so that the governments can make amendments to their schemes and policies.

### **The Emergence of the Research Problem**

The principal purpose of this paper is to determine whether Active Ageing Index can be used at a micro level within India and further determine the areas, which may need policy intervention in this region. A successful adoption of the AAI should be able to highlight the accomplishment of the Indian laws as well as its lacunae in addressing the problems of the senior citizens. This is an exploratory research, carried out based on the researcher's hunch that the piece-meal legislation and schemes made by the Indian Government and the gaps in its implementation are rendering them ineffective

in tackling the problems of senior citizens in India. It is because of these normative and implementation gaps, that the conditions of senior citizens have not improved, even after nineteen years of policy-making. While the inclusive model (right based) followed in many western nations focus more on active ageing and self-dependence, the Indian model is more maintenance-oriented (need-based) and thus fails to integrate senior citizens with society. India also incurs a huge expenditure to provide various kinds of services and benefits. Such policies also lead to wastage of human resource in the form of forced retirement of the aged but able senior citizens (compulsory retirement at the age of 60 needs reevaluation as average life-expectancy and average healthy life expectancy has increased over the period of time and such retirement may be considered age-discrimination) (Schlachter, 2011). However, in order to identify the normative and implementation gaps, there is a need for a scientific tool like the Active Ageing Index, which is adopted in this exploratory paper, and a successful adoption will be able to highlight the accomplishment of the Indian laws as well as its lacunae.<sup>2</sup>

### The Objectives of the Research

Therefore, this paper sought to apply the Active Ageing Index at a micro-level of Guwahati to find out whether the conducive environment required for equal opportunity and participation of senior citizens, that is Active Ageing, is being achieved in Guwahati. It also tried to ascertain if the Active Ageing Index can be used to analyse the situation of senior citizens in Guwahati, which should consequently determine whether it can be applied to study such conditions for entire Assam or India. The instantaneous result of the research was the determination of the scope of active ageing in Guwahati, and it should additionally help determine the key areas that may need immediate attention or policy intervention and for the future development of law in this area.

The paper made an attempt to determine whether the Active Ageing Index can be applied at a micro-level of Guwahati, which will require identification and calculation of comparable indicators of population ageing and evaluation of the performance of the legal framework across these indicators. It does not go for a cause-effect analysis of the problems of the senior citizens. Such an analysis would be only possible through a longitudinal study and not through a cross-sectional study like this one. Therefore, this study can only ascertain the factual position of the senior citizens and highlight the areas of strength and weakness of the legal framework. However, it needs to be borne in mind that the Active Ageing Index highlights the factual position of the senior citizens across the various indicators, which may be used to identify the areas which

<sup>2</sup> AAI has been experimentally applied at micro level in various nations and regions, including Asia, by researchers. See Zaidi, A., & Um, J. (2019). The New Asian Active Ageing Index for ASEAN 3: A Comparative Analysis with EU Member States. *Journal of Asian Sociology*, 48(4), 523-558. Retrieved May 3, 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26868275>, Jane Parry , Jinpil Um and Asghar Zaidi. (2018). Monitoring active ageing in the Asia-Pacific region: Recommendations for future implementation of the MIPAA. *International Journal on Ageing in Developing Countries*, 2 (2): 82-98, Rossarin Gray.(2019) Active Ageing Index in Thailand. *Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR), Mahidol University*, from <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Building%20a%20new%20index%20to%20measure%20active%20ageing.pdf>.

may need legal intervention or modification in the existing law. It does not identify any specific law which needs suitable modification. It determines the performance of the legal system as a whole. Identification of specific laws which need intervention or modification will need further analysis of the causes for the bad performance of the legal system across any indicator. As such, Active Ageing Index is the first step towards identifying the areas that need legal intervention or modification.

### **The Research Method Adopted**

The execution of the laws in Guwahati, its effectiveness, reach and its impact was evaluated by the non-doctrinal method of sample survey. Primary data was collected by the researcher through questionnaires and interviews, conducted within a representative sample in Guwahati, to find out the socio-economic and medico-physical conditions of senior citizens. Data on the access to the welfare measures by the Government of Assam were also collected as required by the Methodology adopted by UNECE (The methodology, grading and the questionnaire is as prescribed by UNECE and not altered by the researcher) (UNECE, 2019 [10]). The data was then used to compute the Active Ageing Index of Guwahati and was compared with existing data of other nations (UNECE, 2019).

The sample size was based on Glenn's Table of Sample Size (Glenn, 1992). The survey was conducted among, more than 400 senior citizens, through a process of Random Sampling carried out between January 2018 to April 2018. Each subject was asked to fill up a questionnaire or interviewed with the help of the same questionnaire. This questionnaire for Active Ageing Index was prepared by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE, 2012)

### **Grading**

The subjective data was graded using the method described by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe for obtaining the Active Ageing Index. Where subjective data was collected, options in sequential order, ranging from the best possible situation to the worst possible situation were given. The best possible situation was given a score of 25 and the worst possible situation was given a score of 0. The highest score that can be achieved in a particular query was thus divided between the numbers of options given in options for the answers. Thus, all such data was calculated on a scale of 0 to 25 (UNECE, 2012). The data was then analyzed using the indicators utilized by UNECE for calculating Active Ageing Index.

### **Limitations of the Research**

Certain indicators, applied in the Active Ageing Index, could not be computed directly in the Indian context due to lack of data and difference in social values in India. These Indicators had to be suitably modified. Such conversions or replacements affect the

ultimate results, though the researcher has taken all possible care to minimize those. The Research is based on a sample size that should provide a Precision Level of up to  $\pm 5\%$  and a Confidence Level of 95%.

### **The Active Ageing Index**

Active Ageing Index is a flexible data-indexing tool used by European nations to monitor the overall progress of the nation to achieve the goals of active ageing. It identifies the domains where it is lagging. It collects data in twenty-two individual indicators. These indicators are categorized into four domains, namely, Employment, Social Participation, Independent Living, and Capacity for Active Aging. The first three domains help evaluate the actual achievements of the nation, while the fourth is a measure of initiating conditions for achieving positive active ageing outcomes. A country is given a cumulative score, which reveals the extent to which senior citizens are enabled and encouraged to participate in the economy and society, and to live independently. The data collected under these twenty-two indicators are analyzed to obtain the Active Ageing Index of the nation by using four methodical steps (UNECE, 2012).

1. First of all, all the indicators are expressed as positive indicators, taking on a positive normative judgment. It means that higher value suggests better prospects of active ageing. For example, the indicator 'at-risk-of-poverty' is expressed in terms of no poverty risk. The indicators capturing the care provided by senior citizens are considered positive because it adds value to society.
2. Each of the indicators is expressed in percentage, ranging from 0 to 100. However, it is to be noted that achieving 100 cannot always be considered maximum achievable, as it will signify the unlikely Utopian target of the best possible outcome. Hence, for example, the target for employment rate indicator for senior citizens is assumed to be full employment.
3. For each domain, the arithmetic weighted average of the indicators is calculated. These results in four gender-specific indices for each domain, namely, Employment domain index; Participation-in-society domain index; Independent-healthy-and-secure-living domain index and the capacity-and-enabling-environment-for-active-ageing domain index.
4. Finally, the overall aggregated indicator is then calculated as the arithmetic weighted average of the domain-specific indices. The final explicit weights used for the four domains are, respectively, 35, 35, 10 and 20 for the four domains (European Commission, 2012).

The advantage of using the AAI is that it provides a uniform basis for evaluating a country's or a region's progress as well as comparative analysis among various nations or regions. The Active Ageing Index has been used in the European Union since 2008 and its first report was published in 2012 (UNECE, 2012).

### Criticism against Active Ageing Index

The Active Ageing Index is being constantly revised to make it more detailed and truer. It is not yet the perfect depiction of the problem of ageing and scholars argue about its accurateness about the factors and indicators or the means of obtaining them. The Methodology applied by the Active Ageing Index, itself, cautions of many such grey areas in it.

1. Active Ageing Index does not differentiate between part-time employment and full-time employment and, thus, the intensity of employment is missed out.
2. Active Ageing Index does not take informal voluntary services into account. This may have a negative impact on countries where formal voluntary services are lacking or unorganized<sup>3</sup>.
3. Care to children and grandchildren are feared to give rise to opportunities of exploitation of the senior citizens.
4. Means to evaluate political participation may not reflect the political set up of the country and therefore may not be suitable for every country<sup>4</sup>.

The Active Ageing Index may not be the perfect indicator of a nation's ageing population or their issues, but it is a scientific and homogenized tool for a comparative analysis of the ageing population of nations and the progress made in redressing them. The current methods used in India, to identify such indicators, do not reveal a true picture of the situation. The use of averages or 'arithmetic means' to assess income, for example, introduces systematic bias with a right heavy outcome. The researcher understands that the Active Ageing Index may not be the best tool to be applied in India, but unless some better tools are designed, this is a good way to start. The application of the Index to India might also be criticized, as there is a huge difference in the existing infrastructure and social structure between Europe and India. However, the problems associated with ageing are, more or less, the same and therefore, the indicators should reveal the positives and the negatives of the Indian system, as well. Certain modifications in the sub-domains were made because of the inherent differences in India (See Caveats). Due care has been taken to ensure that the effect of the alterations are minimized and comparable results are obtained.

### The Active Ageing Index of Guwahati

Active Ageing Index has never been applied in India. Data required for indexing the various domains have never been collected. Due to the lack of existing data and the difference of parameters and approach between the Indian framework and the European counterparts, the Active Ageing Index could not be directly applied to India. Therefore,

<sup>3</sup> Formal voluntary services are rare, if not absent, in Assam and therefore, informal voluntary services had been taken into account for calculating the AAI of Guwahati.

<sup>4</sup> It has been modified, in this paper, to include taking part in political activities at the local level like Panchayats/Municipalities for the purpose of this research.

some of the available data on Indian indicators were converted to comparable European parameters. Due care has been taken to ensure that such changes and conversions do not affect the ultimate result.

### **Caveats**

1. For this research, the entry age for being a senior citizen is considered 55 and not 60. It is in consonance with the European standards but not as per Indian definition which is 60.
2. The employment rate for Guwahati, for people aged between 14 to 60, is taken to be 95% based on official data published in 2015 and the employment rate for age group 55 to 59 is taken to be 76.2. (Press Information Bureau, 2019).<sup>5</sup>
3. Independent Living Arrangement for senior citizens is not a sought objective in India, it is still calculated for the sake of comparison. It is suggested that 'decisional autonomy' may be measured by direct questions relating to decision making by the senior citizen, by future researchers.
4. For Domain 3.4 and 3.5, the Median Income of persons aged below 60 of Guwahati is taken to be \$3 or Rs. 195 per day (Center for Global Development).<sup>6</sup>
5. Monthly savings are considered as disposable income for Domain 3.4.
6. Retirement Pension or other Old Age Pension is considered to be an income of the senior citizens.
7. Adult Literacy Program and Cyber Literacy Program are included within Domain 3.8 though it may or may not help in generating employment for the senior citizen.
8. Healthy Life Expectancy of India was found to be 59.6 years in 2014 (World Life Expectancy, 2017).
9. No data on Remaining Healthy Life Expectancy at 55 for India was found anywhere and therefore, that Indicator has not been taken in the final calculation of AAI.
10. No official or reliable data on National Median Equivalised Disposable Income for India was found. Therefore, an indirect method of calculating the ratio of person at-risk-of-poverty had to be made. For this paper, a person is considered to be at the risk of poverty if his average daily income is below 50% of the Median Daily Income of India, that is less than \$1.5 or Rs. 97.5 or per day (Rangarajan Committee, 2014).<sup>7</sup>
11. Physical activities under Domain 3.1 is meant to include Yoga and meditation too.

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<sup>5</sup> This is the national average as specific figures for Guwahati is not found.

<sup>6</sup> This is the national figure as specific figures for Guwahati is not found.

<sup>7</sup> As per the Rangarajan Committee Report, Poverty Threshold in India is Rs. 32 per day in Rural Area and Rs. 47 per day in urban areas.

### Findings: The Result of the Computation

**Aggregate Score-** The aggregate score for Guwahati is estimated to be 31.1. For Men in Guwahati the cumulative score is 35.7. However, Guwahati fares poorly when it comes to aggregate score for Women with an aggregate of 22.1 points. This indicates the gender differences irrespective of age groups.

**Employment-** In respect of employment, the aggregate score is estimated to be 22.9. Men's Employment, score was estimated to be 36.9 while the same for Women was 6.5. Women employment has been decreasing across active working age group across India and therefore the result clearly reflects the expected trend for active non-working age group of women.

**Participation-** The participation score for the active ageing group in Guwahati is estimated to be 36.3. In case of Men the cumulative score was estimated to be 32.4 and for Women it was estimated to be 31.2. One of the primary reasons for this could be attributed to the fact that senior citizens are still found living in joint families with children and grandchildren instead of nuclear families. Family care and bonding are part of the societal structure still found strong across Guwahati. However, there is also a distinct trend of old age care homes emerging in Guwahati as nuclear families of old age people is rising.

**Independent, Healthy and Secure Living-** An important requirement for the ageing population is the healthy and secure life. However, Guwahati with a score of 39.1 shows that trying circumstances of the elderly and the senior citizens. A serious concern is reflected by the score for 'No Material Deprivation' which is 28.5 indicating that a large proportion of the elderly are materially deprived. The elderly also do not fare well in respect of Independent Living Arrangements with a score of 12.5. While living in joint family may ensure some safety, however, material deprivation is fairly high. Women are less fortunate than Men in this respect with a score of 30.9 vis-à-vis 41.4 for Men.

**Capacity for Active Aging.** Capacity for active ageing is influenced by factors like healthy life, life expectancy, educational attainment. However, the estimated scores for Guwahati was 32.3 which shows that the city is yet to find an environment where elderly have the capacity for active ageing. The 'Remaining Life Expectancy at 55 (not modified to 60)' score was estimated to be 30.8; and Educational Attainment score 25.3 which shows that elderly have limited scope of an active ageing. The score for Men is estimated to be 36.5 and the same for Women is 28.8 which shows that there is need to build upon environment both physical and social for enhancing the capacity of the elderly towards an active ageing.

### Discussion

There is a huge gap between the indicators for men and women, and this difference showed clearly in their respective AAI score. Guwahati scored 36.9 in men's

employment but only 6.5 in women's employment. The condition of senior women is worse than men. It is deplorable and needs governmental intervention. There is a need to create employment opportunities for senior citizens, in general, and women in particular, to bring gender parity. It may be pointed out that Sweden, which leads the score, provides national retirement pension to every person, at the person's choice, from the age of 61, and yet the number of senior citizens who are working is only increasing with time (Swedish Centre, 2018).

The population of Sweden is ageing and Sweden is planning accordingly, by making gradual changes and making the workplace more senior-friendly. Housing schemes, food, etc. are also planned to be more accessible for senior citizens. As a result, their workforce of citizens, aged 65 to 74, grew 124% between 2005 to 2014. They have also raised their age of retirement from 60 to 64 and further allow them to continue to work if they prefer to do so. This not only increased the productivity of the nation but also reduced the burden on its expenditure on senior citizens.

Guwahati fared well in respect Participation. However, most of the participation is within the family life of the elderly. There is very little opportunity for elderly to engage in any organization whether governmental or non-governmental, which are specifically devoted to working for maximizing the participation of senior citizens in society. Voluntary participation of senior citizens may be experimentally started in various areas like nursing, Anganwadi Program, Information dissemination through public kiosks, assistance to other senior citizens, etc. Sweden has a very high rate of voluntary participation, which has been institutionalized. National Volunteering Agency (Volontärbyrån) is an institution, which helps people volunteer for activities based on their preference without requiring them to affiliate themselves with the institution (European Union, 2019).

In respect of healthy living too, the elderly populations have severe limitations in Guwahati. There is lack of open space for senior citizens for any physical activity to lead a healthy life. Parks, activity centre or senior-friendly gyms are rare and need to be initiated. Yoga is an equally effective and cost-friendly alternative, which may be encouraged among senior citizens.

Deprivation of special needs (medical) is another area of concern. Dentures, hearing aids, dialysis facilities, cataract surgeries, as well as medicines, supplements, spectacles, walking stick need to be provided at least at a subsidized rate. It may be mentioned that certain medical facilities like eye surgery are available free or at a highly subsidized rate in Gauhati Medical College.

The city also has limitations in respect of independent living opportunity for the elderly with a score of 3.3. However, this does not indicate absence of decision making power by the elderly in the family. The senior citizens graded their independence in decision making, a healthy 3.37 out of 5. On the other hand, most of the senior citizens have

been living with the families of their children, in a joint family set up, being cared for by their children or grandchildren, which is in consonance with the aims and objective of the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior citizens Act, 2007. However, the condition of the women and those who are totally dependent is found to be less fortunate as deprivation is much higher in those cases. This can be remedied either through, an all-inclusive retirement benefits policy or by enabling employment.

Though various pension schemes have been initiated, the existing policies target the working population and are, at present, not senior-friendly. Pension schemes are yet to make their presence noticeable in the private and unorganized sector. Atal Pension Scheme is a good scheme which may be made more effective and senior-friendly.

A matter of great concern is the size of the population of senior citizens who are the risk of poverty. About 42% of our senior citizens are at the risk of poverty. About 85% of the women senior citizens are at the risk of poverty. About 71.5% reported lack of basic requirements (living amenities). Many reported discrepancies in the implementation of the schemes, which added to the woes of the senior citizens. Senior citizens reported not receiving electricity supply or LED bulbs under the Saubhagya or Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana. Many reported not receiving or other discrepancies in receiving subsidies under Ujjwala LPG schemes. The researcher feels that this is a problem with the implementation of the scheme, further aggravated by a lack of awareness about the schemes.

Safety of the senior citizens was found to be good. Most senior citizens consider their neighbourhood safe. However, safety is becoming a problem in Guwahati. Domestic violence is rare though increasing. However, many senior citizens reported lack of street-lights in their neighbourhood which would have made them feel much safer. Police Patrolling is also not done outside the main parts of Guwahati.

Life-long learning is another area where Guwahati lagged and is almost non-existent. Adult-literacy programs were not visible, schemes for basic skill development are not targeted towards senior citizens and similarly, distant learning programs are also targeted towards a different class of people. Lifelong learning is not considered relevant by most of the senior citizens as employment avenues for senior citizens are almost non-existent. The importance of education and skill development cannot be undermined. Education and awareness is the main foundation upon which everything else takes shape. A nation's development will only remain partial if a significant number of the senior citizens are left out of it.

With the passage of Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, . schemes like Skill India, the government has been focusing on the children and the youths however adult education and skill for the elderly is an emerging area in India which would require systematic intervention both from government as well as various agencies engaged in social welfare especially for women.

The average life expectancy is increasing with time and as stated earlier, India will sooner or later be reaching the stage where a significant population will consist of senior citizens. European nations have realized that and are planning accordingly. Unfortunately, there is no data on India for Healthy Life Expectancy at various stages of life. International Organizations like WHO maintain certain data like Healthy Life Expectancy at birth, cause of deaths, etc. but such systematic data, that is required for planning for ageing, is not available for India. There is a need to step up the process of data collection and periodic updation of crucial data, without which the planning becomes haphazard and unsystematic.

Mental conditions and ailments like depression etc. are neglected and considered to be a part and parcel of the ageing process. However, mental conditions are very important for enabling active ageing. Greater emphasis should be given to mental well-being. A significant population of the senior citizens are unhappy, depressed and feel incapacitated. This needs to be addressed. Psychological counselling and periodic evaluation of the mental health of senior citizens may be promoted through government hospitals, periodic camps, and clinics. There should be at least one psychological counsellor in every government hospitals.

There is scope for improving the coverage of ICT awareness in the state. The smart phones with their app based operations is a handy tool in hand where the seniors need active guidance which can facilitate easy execution of host of services without having to go out anywhere. He could know about the various schemes the government has for him, he can contact various officials, he can know the status of his application, ration card, passport, etc. The motto of the government, that is, 'minimum government and maximum governance' can only be achieved with more ICT awareness, especially among the weaker sections like women and senior citizens.

Social connectedness is much better in India and senior citizens are active through community and cultural forums. Senior citizens of Guwahati, unlike in many parts of the world, feels that their respect in the society has not decreased and have, on the contrary, gained more importance and status with old age. Only 15% of the senior citizens felt that their respect has diminished with age. About 79% of senior citizens feel solidarity with the younger generation. However, political participation is less. Only 32% of the senior citizens are active politically or within the community. Most of them who are active, are usually members of community prayer groups (Naam, Satra), cultural groups (local Bihu committee, etc.) or village level local administration. Some women are a part of local self-help groups and part of a concept called Matri-Gut, which are set up by public schools to monitor the administration of such schools.

However, none of the persons surveyed has written any letter to their political representative, nor have taken part part in any political protest or campaign in the preceding six months from the survey. Therefore, there is hardly any representation of the voices of the senior citizens at the policy-making level. There is a need to carry

their voice to the policymakers and therefore, a bridge between the subjects and the governments may be created through the creation of Senior Citizens' Forum in every village and district level, and integrated to State and National level Forum.

Three main hurdles for active ageing for the elderly in Guwahi are - Education and Awareness, Economic Dependency, and Health which are intricately linked to literacy. s. Better education leads to better awareness and employment. This in turn helps to live a decent life which contributes to a better lifestyle and health.

### **Lessons to be learned from Sweden**

Senior citizens comprise about 20% of the Swedish population. Sweden is among the nations with the highest life expectancy, which is 81 years for men and 84 years for women. Though Sweden has privatized health care for senior citizens to some extent, about 75% of the senior citizens are taken care of, by the government. The Sweden Social Services Act, 1982 provide social support to everyone, like children, drug addicts, disabled and elderly (senior citizens), etc. The Act has been amended from time. Significant changes were brought after the Report of 'Commission on the Future' in 2013. Sweden had formed the 'Commission on the Future', in 2013, to identify and apprehend the challenges it will have to overcome in the near future. The commission highlighted the challenges posed by globalization and technological development, sustainable growth, demographic development, migration and integration, democracy and gender equalities and social cohesion. The commission observed that the prospect of the decline of population in gainful employment, due to population ageing, may widen the gap between the cost and revenue to maintain the standard of welfare services. Retirement of people not only meant a decrease in the working population but also increase in the cost of elderly care. It also meant a need for trained persons with the necessary skills to render such care. Under such a scenario, the growing demand for care will put a lot of pressure on the funding of welfare services. Migration from rural to urban areas may further widen the disparity in services in rural and urban areas. Prospects, conditions, and challenges will differ vastly from municipality to municipality and affect the principle of equal access to services throughout the nation (PMO Sweden, 2013).

Every citizen of Sweden is guaranteed to a reasonable standard of living. The services are optional, that is based on the free choice of the individual who would like avail such services. The services are statutorily required to be of high quality and carried out by trained professionals. The municipal authorities are responsible to carry out the policies under the Act. The beneficiary may make complaints to the municipal authorities if he or she is not satisfied with the services, and even appeal to the County Administrative court against a decision of the municipal authorities. Services or support includes reasonable costs for food, clothes, recreation, consumables, health, hygiene, and other facilities like newspapers, telephone, and television. It also covers accommodation, electricity, insurance and membership of trade unions, etc. The standards of cost are

revised every year based on a national standard (riksnorm). However, such support is not granted to persons who are fit to work or have resources to maintain one's self. The Social Services run special schemes for employment and skill-enhancement for the people who can work. The law provides social security to senior citizens intending to enable them to live an active and influential life, maintain security and independence, respect, and access to quality care. Services for senior citizens include Homecare, like household duties, cleaning, laundry, shopping, etc., and Personal care includes assistance in eating, dressing, moving around, etc. Day-care services are also provided. Senior citizens who need extensive care can opt for sheltered housing services with an option to transfer to any municipality of their choice. All such services are free for persons without any resources or with a certain fee for those who can afford it. The act provides support to persons who render support to the senior citizens, in the form of financial support to people caring for relatives. Sweden has special housing schemes to meet the needs of senior citizens and disabled persons. It prefers to give health care in the house of the person rather than in a hospital. Such care is provided through trained, efficient and multi-professional persons. It not only provides communal meals but also, ready-cooked meals at the home of the senior citizens.

Sweden runs specially designed taxi services for the senior citizens and the disabled. The facilities are not only available to citizens within the nation but also citizens who live outside the country. Sweden has a universal National Retirement Pension, funded from the taxes, and can be opted by its citizen at the age between 61 to 64. The National Retirement Pension consists of Income Pension, Premium Pension, and Guarantee Pension. Though the pension is based upon the taxed income of the person, persons with low-income pension may get the guaranteed pension. Besides, the national pension, they may also get an occupational pension based on the contributions made by their employers. The country has also introduced many preventive health care innovations like medical prescriptions of physical activities (exercises), stimulation through music, movies, etc., cautionary measures against injuries from fall, etc. Sweden may be the nation with the highest tax but the tax is utilized for providing a balance between work and life within society. It is based upon the principle of 'equal access to facilities for all'. Besides the support mentioned above, social support includes support for expectant mothers, paid parental leave, gender equality, monthly allowances for children up to the age of 16, free schooling, almost free health care (including dental care), free public transport, etc.

The results can be seen in the Active Aging Index. Sweden has become the best nation for senior citizens. It is well ahead of larger economies like U.K, France, and Germany in the Active Ageing Index and ahead of economies like the USA and China in other Aging and Living Indices. Sweden has managed to bring gender parity to a gender gap of -2.2 points only. It tops the list in Active Ageing Index for men's as well as women's employment with a gender gap of -7.2 points. The gender gap is positive (1.0) in Participation, which means the participation of women is higher than men. It is also positive for Independent Living (0.9), and Capacity for Aging (0.8).

## Conclusion

The Active Ageing Index reflects scenario of the life of the ageing population of Guwahati. One of the basic requirement for any policy is data base, and there is need for developing appropriate data base for the seniors and the ageing population in the state. The absence of periodic data on the condition of the senior citizens is of utmost necessity for understanding the quality of life of the elderly in the State. Despite, the paucity of data, the present study has been able to highlight the areas that need legal intervention in the State. Adopting the Active Ageing Index or creation of a similar data analyzing tool would be the first step in identifying the areas that need attention, and thereby the corresponding law of the existing legal framework which needs modification.

However, further study as to the causes for its poor performance (cause-effect analysis) would be required before suitable modification into the law may be made. A study of the corresponding laws and its implementation in nations like Sweden may also help in creation or modification of our local laws. Therefore, adoption of an ageing index has not only become necessary but such periodic collection of data may be the only objective way for appraisal of the performance of a legal system and its constant updation so that the goals of such laws are achieved. Therefore, 'piece-meal legislation and schemes and the gaps in its implementation often fall short of addressing the issues of senior citizens in India.

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## Appendix

Employment (Total)	1.1 Emp. rate 55-59	1.2 Emp. rate 60-64	1.3 Emp. rate 65-69	1.4 Emp. rate 70-74	2016 AAI	Gender Gap
Place	LFS-2014	LFS-2014	LFS-2014	LFS-2014	Value	Points
Guwahati	49.90	41.70	0.00	0.00	22.90	
Men	76.22	71.40	0.00	0.00	36.91	-30.39
Women	26.08	0.00	0.00	0.00	6.52	
Weight						
	W1	W2	W3	W4	Sum	
	25	25	25	25	100	

Participation in society (TOTAL)	2.1 Voluntary activities	2.2 Care to children, grand children	2.3 Care to older adults	2.4 Political participation	2016 AAI	Gender Gap
Place	EQLS-2016	EQLS-2016a	EQLS-2016b	EQLS-2016	Value	Points
Guwahati	28.80	47.80	35.50	32.50	36.30	
Men	36.60	42.00	15.00	41.30	32.41	-1.19
Women	17.60	48.80	35.00	20.60	31.22	
Weight						
	W1	W2	W3	W4	Sum	
	25	25	30	20	100	

Independent, Healthy & Secure Living	3.1 Physical Exercise	3.2 No Unmet Needs of Health & Dental Care	3.3 Independent Living Arrangements	3.4 Relative Median Income	3.5 No Poverty Risk	3.6 No severe material deprivation	3.7 Physical safety	3.8 Lifelong learning	2016 AAI	Gender Gap
Place	EQLS-2016	SILC-2014	SILC-2014	SILC-2014a	SILC-2014	SILC-2014	ESS-2014b	LFS-2014	Value	Points
Guwahati	25.50	65.70	12.50	55.30	57.10	28.50	67.80	0.00	39.06	
Men	8.10	76.60	1.30	72.50	71.10	37.90	68.80	0.00	41.42	-10.54
Women	8.50	70.30	4.20	38.50	30.30	15.20	67.30	0.00	30.88	
Weight										
	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	Sum	
	10	20	20	10	10	10	10	10	100	

Capacity and enabling environment for active ageing (TOTAL)	4.1 RLE achievement of 50 years at age 55	4.2 Share of healthy life years in the RLE at age 55	4.3 Mental well-being	4.4 Use of ICT	4.5 Social connectedness	4.6 Educational attainment	2016 AAI	Gender Gap
Place	EHLEIS 2014	EHLEIS 2014	EQLS-2016	ICT Survey 2014	ESS-2014a	LFS-2014	Value	Points
Guwahati	30.80		59.30	12.50	73.30	23.30	32.31	
Men	32.60		63.20	19.60	74.90	56.40	36.45	-7.67
Women	29.20		53.84	2.80	70.90	6.50	28.78	
Weight								
	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	Sum	
	33.33	23.33	16.67	6.67	13.33	6.67	100.00	

Total	Indices				2016 AAI	Gender Gap
Place	Emp	Soc	Liv	Cap	Value	Points
Guwahati	22.90	36.30	39.06	32.31	31.09	
Men	36.91	32.41	41.42	36.45	35.69	-13.64
Women	6.52	31.22	30.88	28.78	22.05	
Weight						
	Emp	Soc	Liv	Cap	Sum	
	35	35	10	20	100	

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## COVID-19, Migrant Workforce and Regional Health Infrastructure in North Bengal

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### Abstract

*The paper tries to explore the space relations of migrant workforce and health infrastructure during COVID-19 pandemic. The geographies of labour supply and demand have been affected and a preparation of COVID-19 infrastructure is developed at national and regional level. The growth of COVID-19 cases and development the regional health infrastructure in West Bengal with reference to North Bengal has been analysed. The testing facilities and their expansion during lockdowns have been critically looked and found that the private laboratories are confined to urban centres only. The existing health infrastructure at district level and its preparation to combat COVID-19 is also captured systematically. The paper identifies how health infrastructure is mostly urban-centric and reverse migration towards villages defeats the objective of lockdown. The character of governance and interference of judiciary in respect to migrant workforce and testing laboratories is highlighted. Lastly, it also reflects on the relations of state, capital and laboring conditions and massive reverse movement of migrant workforces likely to change rural-urban spaces in India.*

### Introduction

Public Health is of prime importance for any society, region or a country. Modern medicine plays an effective role in protecting human health. Human health can be damaged by communicable diseases by its intensity and speed. Health infrastructure is inversely related with any epidemic – better the infrastructure of any geographic region lesser the harm that can result on human health in any point of time. India is lagging behind many countries of the world in respect of such facilities. Under this circumstance, it is utmost important for the provincial and national governments to effectively utilize the existing resources of health infrastructure and plan strategies

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during global pandemic and lockdown. The Coronavirus pandemic began its journey from Wuhan in China in December 2019 travelling through Europe (Jan-Feb 2020) and West Asia (Mar 2020). It reached to the new world USA and India in Mar 2020. The intensity and speed is so fast that the best available health infrastructure in countries like Italy, Germany, France, USA etc. were dismantled, unsuccessful and bowed down to its spread. Till today, a millions of people are suffering from COVID19 worldwide and have died in affected countries. International Monetary Fund has accepted and declared global economic slowdown.

India was fortunate enough to experience it little later and have received ample opportunity to prepare and face this gigantic global pandemic. In the middle of March 2020, the country wide consultations started and partial lockdown in various parts particularly Kerala, Rajasthan, Maharastra were introduced. Finally, *Janta Curphew* was introduced as preparatory phase on March 22, 2020 and later on, nation-wide lockdown was announced, precautions and preparedness started. Coronavirus Pandemic was announced as National Health Disaster and the National Disaster Act, 2005 was implemented throughout the country. However, nationwide lockdown was obviously a bold step to prevent and safeguard the human health of its citizens. But the question arises, whether such initiative was supported by enough planning and coordinated efforts with the various sectors and provincial governments.

It is an accepted fact that India has 90 percent of workforce engaged in unorganized sector where there is no universal social security in place till date. Most of them are out-migrants and concentrated in cities particularly million plus cities e.g. Delhi, Kanpur, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, Mumbai, Pune etc. Agrarian crisis in their home state and rural geographies compel them to migrate outside their places to earn better living and livelihoods. In this context, Regional Development (RD) should be viewed as the articulation of qualitative changes in the geo-bio-techno-social complex of interdependent phenomena in such a manner that the quality of human life improves within the framework of the integrity of the ecosystem (Raza, 1988). The RD refers to change in regional productivity as measured by population, employment, income and laboring conditions. It also means social development which includes quality of public health and welfare, environmental quality and creativity. The RD does not mean the exploitation of virgin territory or the domination of one culture over other but, instead, improving the conditions of chronically underdeveloped regions or regions undergoing cyclical change (Nelson, cf. Bingham & Mier, 1993). In such a situation, one can find two types of space relations are identical: *Geographies (regions) of Labour Supply* and *Geographies (regions) of Labour Consumption*. The supply regions are mainly Assam, West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttaranchal etc. It is estimated that around eight crores of migrant workers were stranded in India and their state-wise distribution is 142.00 lakhs in UP, 86.45 lakhs in Bihar, 70 lakhs in Maharastra, 60.10 lakhs in West Bengal, 56.64 lakhs in Madhya Pradesh, 44.66 lakhs in Rajasthan, 40.19 lakhs in Karnataka, 38,25 in Gujarat, 35.73 lakhs in Tamil Nadu, 26.37 lakhs in Jharkhand,

26.82 lakhs in Andhra Pradesh, and 25.15 lakhs in Assam (Uttarbanga Samba, May 17, 2020). It is a typical demand-supply relationship that exists within same country and complementarity exist in geographic space as conceptualised long before by Ullman (1956). Ullman suggested that spatial interaction to occur between regions depends on three interrelated conditions: Complementarity, Intervening Opportunity and Transferability. 'Complementarity' refers to the need for supply and demand relationship to exist prior to any movement occurring between places. This kind of spatial interactions has many existential realities and daily life of migrant labourers when global pandemic like COVID19 occur in countries like India. Many of them reside in slums and squatter colonies of the cities and engage themselves in various urban services with outsourcing agencies. A large numbers of them also work on construction sector where there is no parent employer and traceability is of big concern. The sudden lockdown had impacted millions of lives of poor out-migrants and suddenly become roofless where state has failed to protect its own citizens. Therefore, failing protection from state and closures of internal transportation system, many labourers walked down to streets aiming for their native places located hundreds of kilometers away from their place of work. This poses a serious question on part of governance whether such crowding without protection of basic health has any bearing on human health in general and current COVID19 pandemic. It is reported that 21486 relief camps were set up across states and around 6 lakhs of migrant labourers are given shelter in these relief camps (Live NDTV, MoHFW Press Release, April 01, 2020). Considering the grave concern, 5000 railway coaches were prepared for of isolation and quarantine centres which may house approximately 3.2 lakhs beds spread over different major railway stations in India.

### **Beginning of COVID-19 Pandemic in India: A Regional Analysis**

The first case of the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic in India was reported on Jan 30, 2020 which originated from China. As of March 29, 2020, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare have confirmed a total of 1024 cases, 96 recoveries, 1 migration and 27 deaths in the country. As on March 28, 2020, the COVID-19 cases was spread over 158 districts and 979 positive cases were found. During that time high concentration of cases are found in Maharashtra followed by Kerala, Karnataka, Telegana, Gujrat, UP, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Delhi (<https://www.mohfw.gov.in/index.html>). As on April 03, 2020, the states which were considered as hotspots were Tamil Nadu (411), Delhi (384), Maharashtra (335), Kerala (295), UP (172), Andhra (161), Telengana (156), Karnataka (125), Assam (20) as reported by NDTV Live. Within a period of 24 days (i.e. on 21.04.2020), it was found that 429 districts reported covid cases with 18985 infected persons (<https://www.mohfw.gov.in/index.html>). The highest positive cases were found in Maharashtra (4669), Delhi (2081) and Gujrat (2066). As per the communication of Department of Health and Family Welfare (GOI, April 30, 2020), all the districts of India were classified into three groups: *Red Zone* (130), *Orange Zone* (284) and *Green Zone* (319). A district is considered as green if there is no

confirmed case and no reported case in last 21 days. The hotspots, red zones and orange zones were based on incidence of cases, cumulative cases, doubling rate, extent of testing and surveillance feedback to classify the districts. The list was dynamic and revised weekly or earlier as per the communications and directions under the Disaster Management Act, 2005. All the million plus cities like Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru etc. were identified as hotspots and red zones.

As per the Govt. of West Bengal, there were four districts considered as hotspots and *Red zones*, eleven under *Orange zone* and eight under *Green zone*. The *Red zone* (4) districts are Kolkata, Howrah, North 24 Pargana and Purba Medinipur. The *Orange zone* (11) districts were Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, Purba Bardhaman, Paschim Bardhaman, Hoogly, Paschim Medinipur and South 24 Pargana. The *Green zone* (8) districts were Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Birbhum, Purulia, Bakura and Jhargram (Uttarbanga Sambad: April 30, 2020). In contrary, Government of India order dated April 30, 2020, ten districts were considered as *Red zone*, five in *Orange* and eight in *Green*. The *Red zone* districts were Kalimpong, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Malda, North 24 Pargana, South 24 Pargana, Kolkata, Howrah, Purba Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur. The *Orange* districts were Murshidabad, Nadia, Purba Bardhaman, Paschim Bardhaman and Hoogly. The identified Green districts were Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Birbhum, Purulia, Bakura and Jhargram (Ananda Bazar Patrika: May 02, 2020). There were confusion and differences in identifying the districts into different categories which has bearing on regional health and its preparedness.

### **COVID-19 and Regional Health Infrastructure in North Bengal**

The regional health care has always been a neglected segment for Government of West Bengal since independence. The epicentre of regional health care in North Bengal and only referral hospital is the *North Bengal Medical College and Hospital* which was set up in 1968. Until recent past, it was the only Medical College catering health services in North Bengal and its catchment starting from Malda (300 kms) in the South, Cooch Behar (200 kms) in east of Assam, Darjeeling (80 kms) and Sikkim (120 kms) in North and adjoining Bihar and Nepal in West. However, four Medical Colleges have come up in recent past and these are situated at Malda (2011), Berhampore (2012), Raiganj (2018) and Cooch Behar (2018). It is well-known fact that all the northern districts of the State of West Bengal i.e. Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North and South Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad etc. are considered as the supply zone for unskilled labour to most of the cities of India and the migrant labourers are engaged in various kinds of urban services typically known as *Unorganised Sector* in economic terms (Hannan, 2020: [www.vikalp.ind.in](http://www.vikalp.ind.in)).

Given this backdrop, an attempt is made to look into the rural health infrastructure in North Bengal vis-à-vis the aggregates for West Bengal. Table-1 shows that average population served per rural health care institution is very high in North Bengal as

compared to rest of Bengal, although, the population density is low in the districts of North Bengal with 804 persons per sq.km as compared to 1029 persons per sq. km in the state of West Bengal (Census, 2011). The figures given in the table also indicate that there are insufficiencies of rural health infrastructure in North Bengal to treat majority of the rural patients in normal times.

**Table 1: District/Region-wise Health Infrastructure (Institutions) in West Bengal (As on 31.12.2016)**

Districts/ Geographic Regions	Number of Health Institutions				Average Rural Population served per Institution (Computed as per Census, 2011)			
	SC	PHC	BPHC	Rural Hospital	SC	PHC	BPHC	Rural Hospital
Darjeeling	230	22	3	9	4865	50857	372953	124318
Jalpaiguri	537	39	1	13	5237	72115	2812495	216346
Koch Bihar	406	29	4	8	6231	87229	632413	316207
Uttar Dinajpur	344	19	3	6	7689	139206	881635	440818
Dakshin Dinajpur	248	18	1	7	5806	79999	1439981	205712
Maldah	511	34	0	16	6746	101388	0	215449
Kolkata	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
North Bengal	2276	161	12	59	6148	86914	1166090	237171
Rest of the Bengal	8093	753	64	214	5955	63997	752969	225187
West Bengal	10369	914	76	273	5997	68034	818199	227777

Note:

- As per IPHS, one Sub-Centre established for every 5000 population in plain areas and for every 3000 population in hilly/tribal/desert areas whereas a Primary Health Centre (PHC) covers a population of 20,000 in hilly, tribal or difficult areas and 30,000 populations in plain areas and each CHC thus catering to approximately 80,000 populations in tribal/hilly areas and 1, 20,000 populations in plain areas.
- Kolkata is an urban district in West Bengal which does not have any rural health care institutions

Source: Computed from Census of India (2011), Health on March 2015-16 (Draft Copy), Directorate of Health Services, Government of West Bengal

Table-2 shows the availability of beds in various Health Centres and Rural Hospital and the average population served per health centre and rural hospital. PHC, BPHC and rural hospital The availability of beds are higher in North Bengal as compared to the state average and rest of the Bengal. However, average population served per BHC beds in North Bengal is higher in comparison to average number of persons served in the state. The corresponding figure for PHC and rural hospital beds in North Bengal also show a similar picture. This reflects the unequal regional health infrastructure at the aggregate level. But a comparison across districts and regions reflects that Kolkata and surrounding areas are better served than the distant areas.

**Table 2: District/Region-wise Health Infrastructure (Institutional Beds) in West Bengal (As on 31.12.2016)**

Districts/ Geographic Regions	Number of Beds in Health Institutions				Average Rural Population served per bed (Calculated as per 2011, Census)			
	PHC	BPHC	Rural Hospital	Total Rural	PHC Beds	BPHC Beds	Rural Hospital Beds	Total Rural Beds
Darjeeling	170	60	320	550	6582	18648	3496	2034
Jalpaiguri	266	10	450	736	10573	281250	6250	3821
Koch Bihar	224	40	240	504	11293	63241	10540	5019
Uttar Dinajpur	132	40	180	352	20037	66123	14694	7514
Dakshin Dinajpur	180	10	210	400	8000	143998	6857	3600
Maldah	270	0	515	785	12767	0	6694	4391
North Bengal	1242	160	1915	3327	11267	87457	7307	4206
Rest of the Bengal	5730	1045	7436	14211	8410	46115	6481	3391
West Bengal	6972	1205	9361	17538	8919	51604	6643	3546

Source: Computed from Census of India (2011), Health on March 2015-16 (Draft Copy), Directorate of Health Services, Government of West Bengal

But these facilities remain Kolkata-centric and would have no meaning for rural mass and labour supply zones of the State if facilities are not decentralized and percolate down further. In fact, it is reported that 50 doctors of Raiganj Medical College and Hospital, Uttar Dinajpur were on leave and stayed in Kolkata till 24.03.2020. They were brought back from Kolkata with the intervention Mr. Arvind Mina, DM Uttar Dinajpur to work in the Medical College (Uttar Banga Sambad: 25.03.2020). The same situation is found in North Bengal Medical College and Hospital, Darjeeling and reportedly that most of the senior resident doctors, Assistant Professors and Associate Professors were on leave and stayed put at Kolkata due to sudden lockdown (Uttar Banga Sambad: 25.03.2020). Reportedly in all the newly established regional medical colleges in the State, senior experienced doctors' work only for three days and rest of the days in a week, they remain in Kolkata. This not only hampers regular treatment and the lack of advisory and consulting facilities for the upgradation of regional health care and peripheral regions in the State compounds problems in respect of proper guidance and planning. The North Bengal region is one of such examples.

### COVID-19 and Preparedness of Health Infrastructure

To overcome the current pandemic, the Government of West Bengal went into collaboration with private health care providers and 67 hospitals are converted into COVID-19 designated hospitals (Govt. of West Bengal: 30.04.2020). All these hospitals are grouped into three categories as Level-2, Level-3 and Level-4. The Level-2 and Level-3 are preliminary and initial process of identification, quarantine and isolation of COVID-19 cases. These hospitals particularly will observe and send samples for

testing to the nearby ICMR approved laboratories for confirmation. The Level-4 is considered as highest category of COVID-19 hospital and identified positive cases are referred here for treatment.

**Table 3: Regional Pattern of COVID-19 (Level-4/State Level) Hospitals in West Bengal (As on 30.04.2020)**

District/Regions	Name of the Hospital	Location of the Hospital	Hospital Category	No of Isolation Beds	No of ICU Beds	No of Ventilators
Birbhum	Glocal	Bolpur	Private	50	8	2
Hoogly	Shramajibi	Srirampur	Private	100	20	8
Howrah	ILS	Golabari	Private	30	21	4
Nadia	SNR Carnival	Kalyani	Private	100	6	1
North 24 Parganas	GNRC Nursing	Kadambagchi	Private	80	12	14
Paschim Bardhaman	Sanaka Med. College & Hosp	Durgapur	Private	370	74	3
Purba Medinipur	Baromaa	Panskura	Private	180	11	5
Southern Region	Seven (7) Hospitals		All are Private	910	152	37
Kolkata	AMRI	Salt Lake	Private	51	12	5
Kolkata	ID & BG	Kolkata	Govt.	82	24	10
Kolkata	MR Bangur	Kolkata	Govt.	1100	24	32
Kolkata	Desun	Kolkata	Private	60	30	10
Kolkata (U) Region	Four (4) Hospitals			1293	90	57
Uttar Dinajpur	Mikki Megha	Raiganj	Private	36	6	1
Darjeeling	Dr Chang's	Siliguri	Private	100	20	10
North Bengal Region	Two (2) Hospitals		All are Private	36	6	1
West Bengal	Thirteen (13) Hospitals			2339	268	105

Source: Computed from Notification No. HF/SPSRC/20/2020/47, dated 16.04.2020, and HF/SPSRC/20/2020/60, dated 30.04.2020, Govt. of WB

This chain of health network is supposed to be well-connected to the district administration and disseminate information to the public for larger interest. For the 9.12 crores of population (Census, 2011), there were only thirteen COVID-19 hospitals for direct treatment in West Bengal out of total 67 designated health care centres with 2339 isolation beds, 268 ICU beds and 105 ventilators (see table-3). The regional distribution was somewhat depressing if one further gleans through the data. The entire Southern districts except Kolkata central, there were only seven COVID-19 hospitals with 910 isolation beds, 152 ICU beds and 37 ventilators. The Kolkata (Urban) central region has four State Level dedicated hospitals with 1293 isolation beds, 90 ICU beds

and 57 ventilators. The North Bengal eight districts had only two COVID-19 hospitals with 136 isolation beds, 26 ICU beds and 11 ventilators. The geographical spread of North Bengal is wider than Southern Region. It has inaccessible mountain district of Darjeeling and lack of transport facility as compared to other parts of West Bengal. Therefore, preparedness and planning for health infrastructure was shortsighted and resulted adverse impacts of COVID-19 pandemic at district and regional level.

**Table 4: District-wise COVID-19 Infrastructure and Outcomes in West Bengal**

Districts/ Regions	ICMR Laboratories [As on 30.05.2020]	COVID-19 Health Infrastructure (Nos) [As on 30.04.2020]				COVID-19 Cases (Nos) [As on 02.06.2020]		
		COVID Hospitals	Total Beds	CCU Beds	Ventil ators	COVID Cases	Recovery Cases	Mortality Cases
Darjeeling <sup>8*</sup>	1	6	525	73	40	49	9	1
Kalimpong	-	-	-	-	-	7	6	1
Alipurduar	1	1	100	6	6	5	-	-
Cooch Behar	-	1	120	26	6	149	-	-
Jalpaiguri	1	1	200	4	3	15	4	-
Uttar Dinajpur	1	2	81	16	7	173	31	-
Dakshin Dinajpur	1	1	20	4	4	41	6	-
Malda	2	2	130	14	13	144	88	-
North Bengal	7	14	1176	143	79	583	144	2
South Bengal	13	48	5375	622	214	3610	1341	110
Kolkata	20	5	1485	94	62	2411	1015	230
West Bengal	40	67	8036	859	355	6604	2500	342

*Note: \*In Darjeeling district, the testing laboratory and COVID hospital is situated in Siliguri only. Source: Computed based on ICMR Notification (30.05.2020). GoWB Notification (30.04.2020), Health Bulletin GoWB (02.06.2020),*

As on 02.06.2020 (Table-4), the COVID cases had increased to 583 in North Bengal during lockdown 4.0 and their district-wise distribution was Uttar Dinajpur (173), Cooch Behar (149), Malda (144), Darjeeling (49), Dakshin Dinajpur (45), Jalpaiguri (15), Kalimpong (7) and Alipurduar (5). In response to this flare up cases, there was no COVID hospital developed in hill stations of Darjeeling and Kalimpong town. The Uttar Dinajpur had highest number of COVID cases but the COVID hospitals were situated in Raiganj only and Islampur subdivision was deprived though there was an existence of super specialty hospital. The arrangement of bed capacity was not developed proportionately in response to pandemic. Institutional quarantine facility was not improved despite knowing the reverse migration of workforce, situation worsened in rural areas in North Bengal also in rest of the areas of the state. This reflects the pitiable handling of the global pandemic and decentralized governance of the state. All these had bearings on health outcomes e.g. the recovery rate was

37.9 percent in West Bengal against 48.3 percent in India. Within the state, there was regional variation; it was 24.7 percent in North Bengal, 37.1 percent in South Bengal and 42.1 percent in Kolkata urban agglomeration. The mortality rate was 5.2 percent in West Bengal (2.8 percent in India), 9.5 percent in Kolkata and 3.0 percent in South Bengal. The mortality rate was higher in West Bengal in comparison to the national average.

### COVID-19 and Testing Progression in West Bengal

The all-India and state-wise (Top 20) cumulative testing data showed that the top five states — Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat — accounted for over 50 per cent of the tests conducted in the country till April 18, 2020. Kerala had, of course, led the way in testing and contact tracing, becoming the first state in the country to flatten the curve of new confirmed cases. Bengal had been lagging way behind most others in testing and it recorded the worst per capita testing rate in the country. Only one out of every 20,000 people in Bengal was tested for Covid-19 till April 18, when the all-India average was already above five. The Hon'ble High Court of Calcutta had admitted bunch of writ petitions questioning the state's handling of the pandemic on April 17, 2020 and asked the state government to report its "adherence to effective screening on war-footing" and "acceleration of the rate of sample collection and testing" (The Telegraph, April 23, 2020). The factual data of COVID-19 testing was available at aggregate level and the regional and district-level picture was not available in public domain. As on April 30, 2020, it was found that only 181 per person were tested per ten lakh population (Table-5). A Reuter's Report published on April 14, 2020 pointed out that West Bengal had done "just 33.7 tests per million, compared to a national average of around 156.9 per million, and 442 per million in Rajasthan" (Sreemoy Talukdar, *Firstpost*, April 22, 2020).

**Table 5: Progression Number of COVID-19 Tests in West Bengal**

Parameters	22.03.2020	30.03.2020	7.04.2020	15.04.2020	23.07.2020	30.04.2020
Samples Tested	128	519	1487	3470	7990	16525
Tests/Per 10 lakh	1.4	5.6	16	38	87	181
Expiry (No)	NA	2	5	7	15	33
Discharge (No)	NA	NA	NA	NA	103	139
Active Case(No)	4	22	69	132	334	572

Source: Computed from Health Bulletin, GoWB (for <https://www.wbhealth.gov.in/pages/corona/bulletin>)

*The Wire* has reported that the highest number of COVID-19 tests was conducted in Maharashtra (30,766), followed by Rajasthan (18,000) and Kerala (12,710) (Wire, April 11, 2020). The state of West Bengal has performed the least number of tests (1889) for the virus amongst all the large states in India. Consequently, several litigations were filed before the hon'ble High Court at Kolkata and on hearing a bunch

of Writ Petitions 5328 of 2020 (Faud Halim)/5334 of 2020 (Vimal Khawas)/5335 of 2020 (Ritesh Tewari)/5336 of 2020 (Raja Satyajit Banerjee), Calcutta HC ordered for monitoring steps taken by Bengal in tackling Covid-19 outbreak and consequently, the Government of West Bengal started publishing district level information in health bulletin since 04.05.2020.

The response of the state machinery in respect of North Bengal districts makes an interesting study. As per ICMR Notification dated 24.03.2020, there were only two government laboratories situated in West Bengal and both were located in Kolkata only. As on 30.05.2020, there were 40 COVID testing laboratories set up in West Bengal of which 29 were government sector and 11 private laboratories (see table-1). Out of 11 private laboratories, 10 were located in Kolkata urban agglomeration and one in Durgapur. In North Bengal, there were only seven (7) laboratories approved by ICMR. In South Bengal, there were 12 government and one private laboratory spread over different districts excluding Kolkata. The Kolkata urban had 10 government and 10 private laboratories. Therefore, if we consider the geographical spread of North Bengal from distance point of view starting from Malda to Cooch Behar in plain areas (500 kms), and Darjeeling and Kalimpong the two hill stations (400 kms) were covered by seven (7) laboratories only. In Darjeeling district, the only government laboratory is situated at North Bengal Medical College and Hospital at Sliguri. At the same time, all the 11 private laboratories are situated in Kolkata (10) and Durgapur (1). In nutshell, the testing infrastructure is not satisfactory in North Bengal and periphery remains neglected by the state. This testing infrastructure also gives an impression of low priority of peripheral districts in governing health care services in West Bengal.

### **COVID-19 and Migrant Workers : What does the Death of a Migrant Labour Reveal**

There was a news report of a migrant labour committing suicide in Islampur subdivision in the district Uttar Dinajpur (Uttarbanga Sambad, April 07 2020). As per local reports, there are many such workers who lost their work but this was reportedly the first case of death due to food crisis. The deceased Shah Alam (27) left behind his wife, two daughter and a son of five years. As revealed by the family members Alam travelled across different states in search of work and managed his family living in dire crisis. He returned from Sikkim just few days before lockdown. In an interview on April 18, 2020, the Medical Officer, Islampur Sub-Divisional Hospital in his statement to Uttarbanga Sambad, revealed that collection of samples for detection of COVID-19 started and were sent to NBMCH on April 17, 2020. The first rounds of samples were found negative. A total of 12272 migrant labourers who returned back, were sent for home quarantine and 95 persons were sheltered in government quarantine centres spreading over four blocks i.e. Chopra, Islampur, Goalpokar-I & Goalpokhar-II in district Uttar Dinajpur. As per correspondence between Government of India and West Bengal, *Shramik* trains were arranged to bring migrant workers in the state back home. In the first phase in May 2020, ten *Shramik* trains (two from Punjab, two from Tamil Nadu, three from Karnataka, one from Rajasthan, one from Kerala

and one from Telengana) were permitted by the Government of West Bengal. No train was arranged from Maharashtra and it is reported that minimum 16 trains are required alone from Maharashtra. The first labour train reached NJP station in North Bengal from Bengaluru and Telengana carrying 3115 persons of Cooch Behar, 151 persons of Alipurduar, 60 persons of Jalpaiguri, 117 persons of Darjeeling and 3 persons of Kalimpong (Uttarbanga Sambad: 10.05.2020). Later on, the Government of West Bengal released a schedule of 105 trains from various states to bring migrant workers back home starting from 17.05.2020 to 15.06.2020 (Ananda Bazar Patrika: 14.05.2020). An estimate of the migrant workers from 23 districts of West Bengal returning during three phases of the Lockdown 1, 2, and 3 shows that the figure may be little over 20 lakhs. The Government of West Bengal stated that all the migrants could not be brought back due to insufficient health infrastructure in the state. The return of the entire migrant labour force would require effective PDS to combat food crisis and transparent MGNREGA for job opportunity during 2020-21 (Hannan, 2020: [www.vikalp.ind.in](http://www.vikalp.ind.in): 11.05.2020). Reportedly, an estimated 3,12,081 migrant labourers returned home during lockdown in North Bengal. The district-wise distribution as per government sources was 1,43,073 persons in Cooch Behar, 84,174 persons in Malda, 74,927 persons in Uttar Dinajpur, 52,026 persons in Dakshin Dinajpur, 31,755 persons in Darjeeling, 30,106 persons in Jalpaiguri, 25,000 persons in Alipurduar (Uttarbangasambad, June 28, 2020).

### Concluding Remarks

During pandemic, the improvement of health infrastructure and COVID-19 hospitals were developed in urban areas and metro cities of labour supplying states of Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, UP etc. There is an urgent need to stimulate the chain of Rural Health Care Network of Sub-Centres, Primary Health Centres, Block Primary Health Centres and Rural Hospitals to address the impinging health care facilities in the wake of the ongoing pandemic. The rural health care network has been in shambles across most of the states in India more so for the states which form the supply hub of migrant labourers to major metros of the country. The pandemic has revealed how concentration of testing facilities in urban areas has revealed the absence of basic health care support required to address the pandemic situation in rural areas. As the foregoing analysis and data has shown in West Bengal, the growth of pathological test laboratories have grown in Kolkata but the same has not grown in other districts of the state. During pandemic the alliance with private health facilities in West Bengal was attempted but the urban concentration of the facilities failed to strengthen the rural and health care system in other regions of the State.

That the migrant workers are the most vulnerable has been reinforced by the current pandemic situation across the country more especially for the states that remain the bulk suppliers of migrant workers. The absence of a data base on migrant workers was the biggest pitfall in the attempt to manage the migrant labour crisis. This has underscored the necessity to create a real-time data base on migrant workforce across India so

that one could analyse the demand and supply relationships that exist across different geographies and formulate policies that address the gaps that have been thrown open by the current pandemic situation. The MGNREGA and PDS which are two prime programmes that could ensure minimum support to rural and the poor people across urban and rural areas need to be strengthened to combat food crisis and the alternative livelihood options in villages and rural areas. Any government intervention requires data base for designing and implementing policies, and India is yet to come up with a robust data base on migrant workers which forms the back bone of the unorganized sector which has highest share in workforce engagement. A web portal at national level may be introduced to register the migrant workers and safety nets may be geared up to boost up urban informal economies. This would minimize vulnerabilities of moving migrant workforce and restoring their public health and protection from exploitative conditions and better working environment in future. While corporate incentives continues to be a priority of the neoliberal Indian state to boost industrial production, there is a need to rethink the relationship of state, capital and labour market with respect to the unorganized sector in India which has an employment share 83% of the work force in the Indian economy. The issue of migrant labourers and labour welfare measures need prioritization a the massive return of migrant workforce or reverse migration from cities to their natives has shown the vulnerability of these workforce. Their defying long marches during lockdown daunting the precarious condition of survival can be understood as a symbolic protest and spontaneous response of workers between *Geographies of Labour Supply* and *Geographies of Labour Consumption* against their working conditions. The pandemic has revealed the precarious condition of India's rural health care system and the vulnerability of the vast rural migrant workforce especially in major labour supplying states like West Bengal.

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## **Improvement of Connectivity could Transform Assam into a Pivot of Act East Policy: Challenges and Opportunities**

**Rupak Bhattacharjee<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*The Act East Policy (AEP) focuses on strengthening India's relations with countries in the immediate and extended neighbourhood to the east. The objective of the AEP is to boost economic cooperation, trade and commerce, cultural ties with the countries of South, South East and East Asia and Asia-Pacific region. The North Eastern Region (NER) is a vital cog in the wheel of the AEP due to its geo-strategic location and vast resource potentials. Assam is the most crucial North Eastern state for the implementation of the ambitious AEP. The paper seeks to evaluate the importance of Assam in the AEP and government's efforts to develop Assam's transport infrastructure along with North East's through improvement of roadways, construction of strategic bridges, expansion of railway networks, revamping of inland waterways, up gradation of air connectivity and building of multi-modal transport system.*

The Act East Policy (AEP) focuses on strengthening India's relations with countries in the immediate and extended neighbourhood to the east. The objective of the AEP is to boost economic cooperation, trade and commerce, cultural ties and develop strategic partnership with the countries of South, South East and East Asia and Asia-Pacific region through engagement at the bilateral, regional and multilateral levels. The major thrust of the AEP is to make India's overall engagement with the eastern neighbours more pro-active and action-oriented. The North Eastern Region (NER) is a vital cog in the wheel of the AEP due to its geo-strategic location and vast resource potentials.

The paper seeks to assess the importance of Assam in the AEP and government's efforts to develop NER's transport infrastructure such as improvement of roadways, construction of strategic bridges, expansion of railway networks, revamping of inland waterways, up gradation of air connectivity and building of multi-modal transport system. The paper also tries to evaluate the prospects of the connectivity projects both

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undertaken and proposed and analyse their challenges. Finally, an attempt has been made to suggest policy measures for proper implementation of the AEP.

The NER acts as a land bridge between India and South East Asia and offers immense possibilities to forge close commercial ties and renew historical and cultural links that the region enjoyed in the past. New Delhi's policy makers know well that the success of the AEP would largely depend on improved connectivity, security, political stability and all-round development of the NER. Through the AEP, the union government is making concerted efforts to address some of the intractable problems of the region including geographical isolation, infrastructure bottleneck and stagnation of industrial growth.

The AEP has four key components-- connectivity, commerce, culture and capacity building. Among them, connectivity is the most important aspect and the realisation of the rest three heavily relies on the improvement of intra-regional, inter-regional and trans-national connectivity of the NER. In its efforts to connect the NER with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the union government has undertaken several projects to develop physical infrastructure including roadways, railways, waterways, airways and telecommunications. A major road connectivity project currently underway is the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (TH).

### **Importance of Assam in the AEP**

Assam is the most crucial North Eastern state for the implementation of the ambitious AEP since it is the centre of all business and transport related activities in the region. Assam is the largest among the eight states in the region in terms of resources, size of market and population. Assam is also the only state in the NER having a viable industrial base and elaborate transport networks including roadways, railways, waterways and airways.

Assam had a prosperous economy in the pre-independence period. However, the partition of the sub-continent in 1947 inflicted severe damage to the economy of Assam as the railways, roadways and waterways which existed between the region and the then East Bengal throughout the colonial period, were closed one after another. The previous Sarbananda Sonowal government of Assam consistently demanded the restoration of the previous road, rail and riverine links with Bangladesh for the revitalisation of the region's isolated economy. Efforts are also being made to address Assam's connectivity issues through regional cooperation forums like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN) and South Asian Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC).

The Assam government is vigorously pursuing the AEP as it believes that it is a panacea for the state's development that has been throttled by insurgency since the early 1990s. It argues that the up gradation of transport infrastructure is set to change the development

narrative of the state. The government has set up an Act East Department for effective implementation of the AEP<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, a new research centre on South East Asia has been established at Gauhati University to boost the AEP (De 16 October 2019).

### **Efforts to Develop NER's Transport Infrastructure and Their Prospects**

As part of its “Neighbourhood First” policy, the NDA government is also making concerted efforts to enlarge India’s engagement with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar—all share borders with the NER. In addition to the governments’ efforts, businessmen, journalists, academicians and diplomats from India and other South Asian nations have been interacting regularly to explore the possibilities of increasing trade and commerce of the North Eastern states especially Assam by improving connectivity with neighbouring countries with an extra emphasis on upgrading physical infrastructure in the border areas<sup>2</sup>.

In its bids to facilitate cross-border movement of goods and people, the union government has taken up a number of infrastructure projects in Tripura including Agartala-Akhaura rail line, construction of a bridge over the Feni river to access Chittagong port, a connecting road from Sabroom to Chittagong Port and up gradation of Ashuganj river port in Bangladesh for boosting trade, transit and connectivity between the two neighbouring countries (Bhattacharjee 2015).

Similarly, several new road projects have been undertaken by the Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) along with up gradation of old National Highways (NHs) in the NER including Assam. The MoRTH has also planned to build an Economic Corridor (EC) under the Bharatmala Scheme (BS) to improve connectivity in border and remote areas to facilitate faster movement of cargo and increase of export (Sarma 2019). The Assam government has been pitching for the improvement of the state’s road networks with other North Eastern states to connect with Bangladesh, Bhutan and China.

The Assam government has also taken a number of initiatives in collaboration with the Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) to upgrade the state’s riverine transport system and revive the British era water routes with Bangladesh. The state government has been pushing for the development of a robust multi-modal transport networks in the state involving roadways, railways and waterways for proper implementation of the AEP. Moreover, the NER is getting seamless digital connectivity following the signing of agreement between India and Bangladesh for using unspent bandwidth available at Cox’s Bazar.

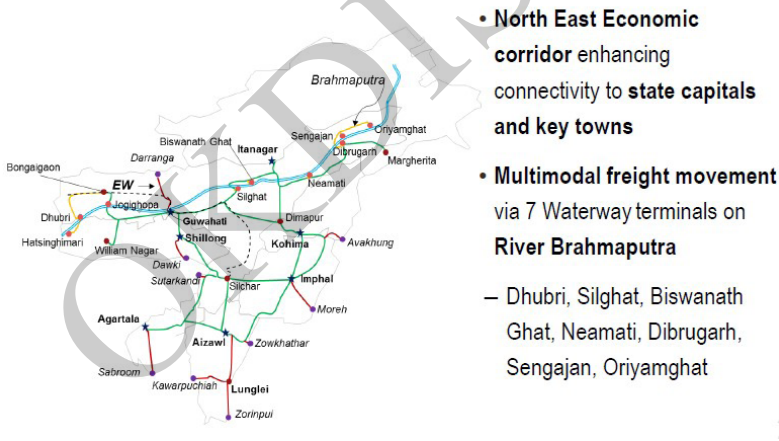
### **Improvement of Roadways**

The up gradation of roadways is crucial for the NER as this mode of transportation is commonly used by people in this region especially in the hilly areas. Since the early

2000s, the MoRTH has undertaken several new road projects in the NER including Assam. Under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), a total of 9843 km-long road projects have been taken up in Assam at a cost of Rs 8192.45 crore. Some of them have already been made operational, while the remaining would commence soon<sup>3</sup>. The MoRTH has also initiated extensive road projects to upgrade existing NHs in the region, namely, 37, 37(A), 40, 44, 51, 52(B) and 61. They are reportedly at different stages of implementation<sup>4</sup>.

The NER is part of the union government’s other mega road connectivity programmes as well. Under the B S launched in October 2017 by the MoRTH, construction of about 50,000 km of highways categorised as National Corridors, ECs and others have been envisioned across the country. Among the selected ECs, one is called North East Economic Corridor (EC 44). The BS is focusing on improving connectivity in the NER and establishing linkages with the Inland Waterways already identified on the Brahmaputra in Assam. The EC 44 seeks to connect all the state capitals in the region (Sarma 2019). A map showing North East Economic Corridor and multi-modal freight movement through Brahmaputra is given below:

**North East Economic Corridor and Multi-Modal Freight Movement through Brahmaputra**



Source: Ministry of Road Transport and Highways

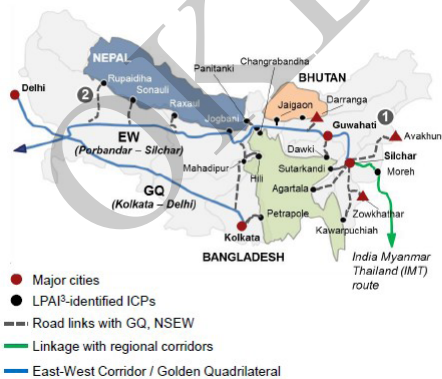
In its attempt to counter the growing influence of India’s strategic adversary China in the neighbourhood, New Delhi has taken up several transport infrastructure development projects in Bangladesh and Myanmar. India extended 3 Lines of Credit (LoC) worth about \$8 billion to Bangladesh. Under these LoCs, several infrastructure projects were undertaken in neighbouring Bangladesh to enhance connectivity with the NER. India has also disbursed around \$1.04 billion in grant projects, and has provided concessional loans of \$478.9 million from India’s LoC amount of \$ 750 million to Myanmar. Projects on grant funding include renovation of 69 bridges and

building the Kalewa-Yargi road segment of the TH<sup>5</sup>.

Moreover, India has planned to extend the 2800 km-long road from Moreh to Mae Sot in Thailand, to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The TH project constitutes an integral part of India’s role in the proposed Trans-Asian Highway. In addition to these, India is fast tracking the SASEC road connectivity programme. A number of international donor agencies including Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank (WB) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) are currently involved in the infrastructure development of the NER.

As part of the implementation of the AEP, the government of Assam sought immediate up gradation of the intra-regional road connectivity especially those linking the neighbouring countries. Assam could be connected to the TH through the existing NH-39 and NH-36. Both the highways connect Indo-Myanmar border town of Moreh through Dimapur, Kohima and Imphal<sup>6</sup>. The road from Dimapur to Kohima is reportedly in good condition, while the newly-created National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited (NHIDCL) has been up grading the Kohima-Imphal Road. The road from Imphal to Moreh is also currently undergoing up gradation (De 20 October 2019). Once these renovation processes are completed, the connectivity of the North Eastern states including Assam with neighbouring Myanmar, which acts as gateway to the ASEAN, will improve significantly. A map showing NER’s road connectivity with neighbouring countries is given below:

**Road Connectivity with Neighbouring Countries**



- 24 Integrated check posts (ICPs) identified
- **Transit through B'desh to improve North East connectivity**
- **Integrating Bangladesh – Bhutan – Nepal and Myanmar – Thailand corridors will make North-East hub of East Asia**

Source: Ministry of Road Transport and Highways

In its attempts to promote the AEP, the Assam government has also called for the improvement of the existing roads between the state and Bhutan. The 38 km-long NH-152 directly connects Assam to Bhutan. Recently, two new roads, namely, NHs-127(C) and 127 (D) have been proposed. Both the highways would connect the proposed East West Corridor from Porbandar in Gujarat to Silchar in Assam, could be connected to Bhutan adding fresh impetus to the Indo-Bhutan economic, commercial

and people-to-people ties<sup>6</sup>.

The Assam government is also pushing for the improvement of the existing road links between the state and Bangladesh. There are four NHs which connect Guwahati to Dhaka. They include: NH-37 and 40 totalling 467 km from Guwahati to Dhaka via Jorabat-Shillong-Dawki-Sylhet; NHs—37, 40, and 151 totalling 657 km from Guwahati to Dhaka via Jorabat-Shillong-Karimganj-Sutarkandi-Sylhet; and NH-37 and NH-51 totalling 261 km from Guwahati to Dhaka through Paikan and Dalu<sup>7</sup>.

Since June 2015, the Guwahati-Dhaka bus service has been operating. The opening of this bus route is set to strengthen trade and historic ties between Assam and Bangladesh. Bilateral discussions are currently underway to open bus services on Shillong-Chittagong and Silchar-Karimganj-Sylhet routes (Bhattacharjee 2015). The Assam government is also making efforts for the up gradation of road networks between the state and Chittagong Port for the revitalisation of its economy. To ensure smooth access to Chittagong Port, it seeks the development of the 612 km-long road from Guwahati to Chittagong via Shillong and Dawki as four-lane highway<sup>8</sup>.

In a significant development on the AEP front on March 9, 2021, Prime Minister Modi virtually inaugurated the “Maitri Setu” (Friendship Bridge) over the Feni river connecting south Tripura’s Sabroom with Bangladesh’s Chittagong Port. This cross-border connectivity will make Tripura the “Gateway of Northeast” to the port, which is just 80 kms from Sabroom. The bridge will be the fastest land route to connect the landlocked NER to the port. It is a new trade corridor between India and Bangladesh with immense potential. A recent WB report says that improving cross-border connectivity could increase India’s exports to Bangladesh by 172% and Bangladesh’s exports to India by 297%. This connectivity has also enhanced the business prospects of Tripura’s adjoining Barak Valley districts of Assam. The port, which is used by India to transport goods to the NER, has potential to play a key role in India’s engagement with South East Asia and its Indo-Pacific vision<sup>9</sup>.

The Assam government is also considering the possibility of connecting Assam with China through Arunachal Pradesh. The reopening of the famous 1,736 km-long Stilwell Road from Ledo in Assam to Kunming of China through Myanmar could bring about a sea change in the business activities of Assam. The NH-153 from Lekhapani to Jairampur, which is part of the Stilwell Road, has been up graded under the Special Accelerated Road Development Programme for North East<sup>10</sup>.

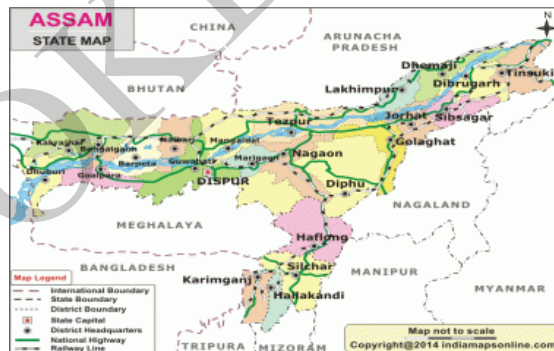
The road from Jairampur to Pangsau Pass, a village on the Indo-Myanmar border, via Arunachal’s Nampong is also renovated. The Assam government has been demanding the revival of this historic road with the cooperation of Myanmar since the early 2000s. The road could be used for conducting Indo-ASEAN and Indo-China trade. Experts have pointed out that the road can reduce the transportation cost of India’s foreign trade by 30 % (Zaman 2012).

The Assam government is also looking for other possibilities of connecting the state with China through Arunachal. The 510 km-long NH-52 in the northern bank of Brahmaputra from Baihata Chariali to Jonai is a vital road that connects Arunachal. The state government has called for the up gradation of this road<sup>11</sup>. The 1841 km-long strategic Trans-Arunachal Highway (TAH) from Tawang to Kanubari connects NH-52 near Akajan. The TAH is currently under construction and is scheduled to be completed by March 2027. Once this road becomes operational, Assam could be easily connected to China via Tawang.

Assam has proposed the improvement of NER's road connectivity with rest of the country too. The 308.77 km-long NH-31 from Boxirhat (Assam-West Bengal border) to Jalukbari near Guwahati links the entire North East with mainland India. The state government wants immediate up gradation of this road for seamless movement of interstate movement of cargo and passenger. In order to facilitate industrial development of Assam, the government has also suggested speedy up gradation of some state highways and operationalisation of the missing links including alternate route from Silchar to Guwahati via Harrangajao and Neille<sup>12</sup>.

In its attempts to promote the AEP, the state government wants to develop an integrated highway network in Assam in planned way within the next 10 years<sup>13</sup>. There are 39 NHs with a total length of 3900.44 km running through Assam. They include 15 newly declared NHs with a length of 1032.13 km. Moreover, 847 km of road segments have already been identified to be up graded to NH<sup>14</sup>. A map showing Assam road network is given below:

#### Road Map of Assam



Source: *Public Works Buildings & NH, Government of Assam*

On November 5, 2018, the then Assam Public Works Department (PWD) Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that the state government has initiated an ambitious project called “Assam Mala” to upgrade all state highways as per the specifications of the NH. Work on some of them has already started while the remaining ones will be taken up soon<sup>15</sup>. The state government reportedly spent Rs 22,160 crore during Fiscal Year (FY) 2018-19 on repairing NHs and state highways, construction of bridges and

building of new roads at various places<sup>16</sup>. The government has been fast tracking all the ongoing road projects with the aim of completing them by 2020<sup>17</sup>. However, the Covid-19 crisis has slowed down the process to an extent.

### **Construction of Strategic Bridges over Brahmaputra**

The pace of strategic infrastructure development in North East has gained momentum in the recent years. In a significant development on May 26, 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi opened the Dhola-Sadiya Bridge to boost connectivity, trade and development in the NER. The 9.15 km-long bridge built over the mighty Brahmaputra is the longest in India. The union government has been trying to make Assam a hub of trade, transit and connectivity. While inaugurating the bridge, Prime Minister Modi said it placed Assam at the centre of India's efforts to expand trade links with South East Asia under the AEP (Bhattacharjee 2017).

The Dhola-Sadiya Bridge is a game changer for the region in terms of connectivity. It connects Dhola on the Brahmaputra's south bank to Sadiya in the north. Following the bridge's opening, the travel time has been reduced from over two hours to just 30 minutes. The operationalisation of the bridge is important from the perspective of development of India's isolated NER as well. By establishing road connectivity with inaccessible and backward areas, the bridge is set to galvanise all-round development in Upper Assam and eastern Arunachal (Bhattacharjee 2017).

Again on December 25, 2018, Prime Minister Modi inaugurated the Bogibeel Bridge near Dibrugarh in Assam. It is also a strategic infrastructure project and an engineering feat. The 4.98 km-long bridge is the longest road-cum-rail bridge in the country and only second in whole Asia. It was a difficult mission to complete this state-of-art bridge given the unpredictable nature of the Brahmaputra and constant soil erosion of its banks. It took 16 years to finish this project after missing several deadlines (Bhattacharjee 2019).

The bridge has significantly improved connectivity between Assam and Arunachal. Establishing seamless connectivity between northern and southern banks of the mighty Brahmaputra has always been a challenging mission. But India has finally broken that jinx. It connects Dibrugarh on the south of the Brahmaputra to Silapathar in Dhemaji district on the Assam-Arunachal border both by road and rail (Bhattacharjee 2019).

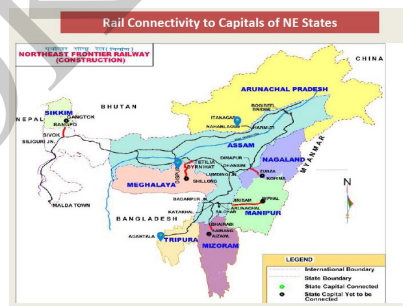
Following the operationalisation of the Bogibeel Bridge, it takes just 40 minutes to reach Dhemaji from Dibrugarh by train and 90 minutes by road. The bridge links two existing NHs—37 on the south bank and 52 on the north bank. With the opening of the bridge, the road distance from Dibrugarh to Itanagar has been reduced by 150 km and rail travel distance by 705 km. The bridge will stimulate economic development of Assam's two isolated and backward districts—Dhemaji and Lakhimpur. Reports suggest that the bridge will benefit about 5 million people in Assam and Arunachal

in sectors like trade, agriculture and tourism and facilitate Assam's connectivity with China through Arunachal (Bhattacharjee 2019).

Assam is anxiously waiting for another milestone. The ongoing Dhubri-Phulbari Bridge Project, nearly 18 km long, will be the biggest in India once becomes operational. The four-lane bridge over the Brahmaputra connecting Dhubri in Assam with Phulbari in Meghalaya, once completed will reduce travel distance between the two towns by 203 km. The newly declared NH-127 B from Srirampur (Assam-West Bengal border) to Tura in Meghalaya via Dhubri and Phulbari through the bridge will vastly improve connectivity between Assam and Meghalaya and in the Indo-Bangladesh border areas. Moreover, the PWD has decided to build about 700 bridges at a cost of Rs 1500 crore to improve road connectivity across Assam<sup>18</sup>. In addition to these, the Assam government is pushing for the construction of four new bridges over Brahmaputra, namely, Mjuli-Jorhat, Dhakuakhana-Tekeliphuta-Dishanmukh, Gohpur-Numaligarh and one near Tezpur<sup>19</sup>.

### Expansion of Railway Networks

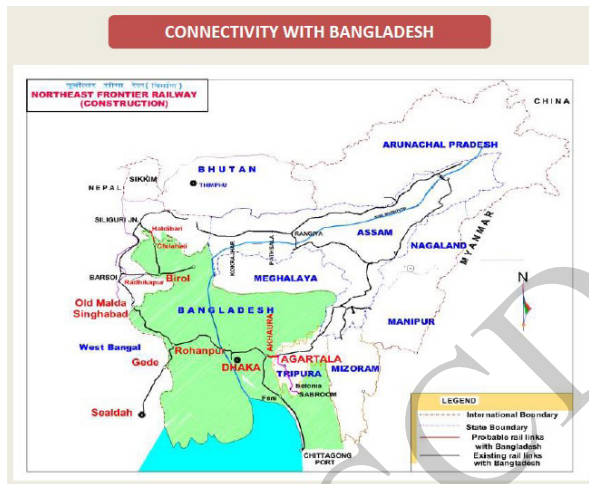
Like the roadways, the development of railways in the NER and its linkages with the railway networks of the neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar is equally crucial for proper implementation of the AEP. Assam is the only state in the region having operational railway networks. In rest of the North Eastern states, railways remained virtually non-existent for long. In order to improve intra-regional railway connectivity, it is important that all the North Eastern states are to be connected to the existing railway routes of Assam for establishing linkages with the national networks. A map showing rail connectivity to capitals of North Eastern states is given below:



Source: Northeast Frontier Railway

India has to develop cross-border railway links with the eastern neighbours for expanding trade and commerce and people-to-people contacts. The Assam government has proposed to restore the pre-partition railway links with Bangladesh such as Chittagong to Makum, Cox's Bazar to Ledo and Golakganj to Moirabari (De 20 October 2019). India also has to take initiative to reopen the Mahishasan-Shahbazpur (Bangladesh) rail route, which has been non-operational since 1996 for the lack

of adequate traffic (Bhattacharjee 2018). A map showing rail connectivity with Bangladesh is given below:



Source: Northeast Frontier Railway

Railways play an important role in strengthening Indo-Bangla friendly ties. The Railway Minister of Bangladesh during his visit to Agartala in November 2017 announced that his country would restore railway links at 12 places between the two nations which were discontinued after the partition. During the colonial period, Assam was also connected to Bangladesh through rail lines that included Karimganj-Chittagong and Mahishasan-Chittagong (Bhattacharjee 2018).

In the recent years, the Union Ministry of Railways has taken up a number of projects to upgrade cross-border railway connectivity. The 15.4 km-long Agartala-Akhaura (in Bangladesh) rail line is currently under construction. This line is being constructed at an estimated cost of Rs 968 crore which is fully funded by India (Bhattacharjee 2018). Reports indicate that the construction of this rail line is progressing well and the much awaited rail link will be completed by September 2021<sup>20</sup>.

Once this railway line becomes operational, Akhaura will be border inter-change point for Indian and Bangladesh Railways and Assam could establish direct link to Dhaka, Ashuganj river port and Chittagong and Mongla sea ports through Tripura thereby ending its economic isolation and marginalisation. The Agartala-Akhaura rail route will also significantly contribute towards expanding sub-regional connectivity and socio-economic development in both the countries<sup>21</sup>.

The Agartala-Akhaura rail project assumes significance for Assam following the completion of broad gauge conversion of Lumding-Silchar and Badarpur-Agartala sections of the Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR). Recognising the strategic significance

of this rail link, the NDA government has attached top priority to the project. The PMO has reportedly been directly overseeing this project, which is a part of the ambitious TAR (Bhattacharjee 2018).

The TAR, which is an elaborate railway network linking Asian countries with European, also figures prominently in the connectivity projects undertaken to promote the AEP. Under the TAR plan, three railway routes between India and Myanmar through Bangladesh will be constructed/renovated. India is a signatory to the TAR Agreement inked in November 2006 and under this agreement, New Delhi will build and renovate rail links with Myanmar in projects worth Rs 29.41 billion. The TAR connectivity plan includes trans-national railway lines from West Bengal to Tripura through Bangladesh and then Tripura to Myanmar via Mizoram (Sarma 2019). A map showing TAR network is given below:



Source: *Northeast Frontier Railway*

Another proposed rail route is from Imphal to Moreh and then Tamu in Myanmar. The Imphal-Moreh Railway Project has reportedly been sanctioned. After the implementation of the project, Moreh or Tamu will serve as border inter-change point. Assam could be connected to this cross-border railway link through the Silchar-Jiribam-Imphal rail route. According to recent reports, this project is in advanced stage of completion (Sarma 2019).

The business and industry leaders based in Guwahati have underscored the need of speedy implementation of the Imphal-Moreh Railway Project to ensure greater trans-border engagement. They have reasoned that there would not be much traffic through the India-Myanmar-Thailand TH after its operationalisation due to infrastructure bottleneck. Therefore, they are emphasising the early completion of the Imphal-Moreh Railway Project. The business leaders have further suggested that Moreh township on the Indo-Myanmar border needs to be developed as an international transit hub

between South and South East Asia similar to the kind exists in continental Europe (Pant 2019).

The NDA government has attached priority to the ongoing railway connectivity projects in the NER. The government claims that during 2014-19, railway networks of the region received fresh impetus with liberal funding and speedy execution of the projects<sup>22</sup>. The increase in the fund allocation for NER's railway projects has been a positive development. The union government has allocated 9% of the railway budget 2020-21 for improving connectivity in the region. The funds sanctioned in the budget was spent on various projects for laying new tracks, doubling of railway lines in the region including the newly proposed doubling of the key 381 km-long Lumding-Tinsukia-Dibrugarh line at an estimated cost of Rs 3810 crore<sup>23</sup>.

The NFR has undertaken several infrastructure projects for enhancing the movement of passenger and goods within Assam and between the NER and the country's main railway networks. The work of the new double line from New Jalpaiguri in West Bengal to New Bongaigaon is reportedly progressing well and will be made operational soon. The work has also commenced for the 142 km-long broad gauge (BG) line from New Bongaigaon to Kamakhya via Rangia and it is expected to be completed by March 2023. The work for the 2<sup>nd</sup> BG line in New Bongaigaon-Goalpara-Kamakhya section has started and its deadline for completion is March 2023<sup>24</sup>.

Moreover, the construction of a new double line (102 km) from Digaru to Hojai is currently in progress and is likely to be completed by May 2021. Once it is made operational, the capacity of train movement in Guwahati-Lumding section will be increased significantly. The electrification of New Jalpaiguri-Guwahati route is currently underway and is expected to be completed by the end of 2021. In addition to these, on November 10, 2016, the then Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu announced the 12 km-long elevated New Guwahati-Kamakhya railway corridor project. The entire project with an estimated cost of Rs 5000 crore is designed to contribute to the smart city project<sup>25</sup>.

The NFR had initially set target of 2020 to connect all North Eastern state capitals to the main railway networks of India through Assam. But all the state capitals could not be connected within 2020 as some of the ongoing projects are facing various challenges. While Itanagar and Agartala are already connected to the national network, the railway projects linking the capitals of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya are in different stages of implementation. The NFR has set the revised target of 2022 for completion of Manipur and Mizoram railway projects<sup>26</sup>.

The linking of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya with the existing networks of Assam will tremendously boost the economy of the NER. The improvement of railway network will facilitate expansion of established business and encourage small entrepreneurs to enter the market<sup>27</sup>. Besides, it will make transportation of essential

commodities much cheaper, faster and safer to these states. Moreover, for effective implementation of the AEP, Assam needs seamless railway connectivity with the North Eastern states sharing international borders.

Manipur will be connected by a 111 km-long line from Jiribam to Imphal through steep hills and deep gorges. The construction of the first segment of the new line from Jiribam to Vangaichungpao (12 km) was completed in March 2017, while the laying of track from Vangaichungpao to Imphal via Tupul is currently underway<sup>28</sup>. The Jiribam-Imphal is strategic railway line which will not only put Imphal on the railway map in the next two years but also facilitate the route's extension up to Moreh on the Indo-Myanmar border and beyond to further link it with the proposed TAR.

Mizoram will be connected by a 52 km new railway line from Bhairabi to Sairang near capital Aizawl. Reports suggest that so far, 58.43% of the project has been completed. In Nagaland, the ongoing Dhansiri (Dimapur)-Zubja (near capital Kohima) Rail Project has been fast tracked since September 2018. There is a land acquisition issue involved in the project and the target for completion is three years after complete land is handed over to the NFR<sup>29</sup>.

Meghalaya's capital Shillong will be connected to Assam through the new Tetelia-Byrnihat rail line. The 21.50 km length of the project falling in Assam from Tetelia to Kamalajari got completed in October 2018. The remaining section in the state, the 108.40 km Byrnihat-Shillong segment of the project has been facing strong resistance from the influential Khasi Students' Union. Therefore, the target for completion has not been fixed as the same would be decided once the entire land is physically handed over to the NFR<sup>30</sup>.

The NFR has also taken initiatives in the last few years to connect some of the major towns of Arunachal to the railway networks of Assam. Efforts are on to extend the railway network northwards to Tawang and eastwards to Tezu which is not far from India-Myanmar-China trijunction. The preliminary survey of the proposed 378 km line from Bhalukpong to Tawang via Tenga through the rugged mountains is over<sup>31</sup>. After the completion of this strategic rail project, Assam will get an additional route to connect with China through Tawang to boost the AEP.

There are several railway projects in Arunachal under various stages of implementation. Some of them connecting with the railway networks of Assam include: North Lakhimpur-Bame-Aalo-Silapathar (247.85 km), Pasighat-Tezu-Parshuram Kund-Rupai (225 km), Dumduma-Simalguri-Namsai-Chowkham-Wakro (96 km), Dangri-Roing (60 km), Deomali-Naharkatia (20 km), Lekhapani-Kharsang-Miao-Nampong-New Kamlang-Deban (75 km), Tinsukia-Kanubari-Deomali-Lekhapani-Jairampur-Kharsang-Miao-Dayun-Tezu-Bhismaknagar-Roing-Dambuk-Pasighat (300 km) and Margherita-Deomali (31 km)<sup>32</sup>.

Once these lines become operational, there will be smooth movement of food grain, cement, sugar and other essential items to the North East<sup>33</sup>. Besides, the new rail lines will boost tourism and business activities adding much needed impetus to the local economy. Among the North Eastern states, Assam will get maximum benefit from the expansion of railway networks in the region since it has the biggest domestic market in the NER.

The operationalisation of the Bogibeel Bridge is also a game changer in terms of expanding railway connectivity especially in the northern bank of Brahmaputra and Arunachal. It has provided much needed connectivity between the two existing railway networks in the southern and northern banks. The bridge has established links between Dibrugarh and the Rangiya-Murkongselek section in the north bank and reduced the train journey from Dibrugarh to Naharlagun to less than 100 km. It has also offered alternate and shorter routes from Dibrugarh to New Delhi and Kolkata via Rangiya (Bhattacharjee 2019).

### **Revamping of Inland Waterways**

One of the most significant developments in the arena of Assam's transport system has been the persistent efforts of the state government to develop inland waterways through the two major river systems—Brahmaputra and Barak. Both are identified as National Waterways (NWs) No 2 and 16, respectively. The IWAI under the MoRTH has taken a number of initiatives to harness the full potential of NW-2 from Sadiya to Dhubri on the Brahmaputra. The Assam government is also fully cooperating with the IWAI to introduce cruise tourism through the NW-2 to boost the state's economy. The efforts to develop Assam's inland waterways and restore the British era river routes with Bangladesh are integral parts of the promotion of the AEP.

In a major development on December 30, 2017, the then Union MoRTH Minister Nitin Gadkari announced in Guwahati that Rs 1,250 crore was sanctioned for comprehensive development of inland water transport of Assam. The fund will be utilised for constructing 56 new Inland Water Terminals (IWTs) and up gradation of "roll-on, roll-off" service in which people and goods including vehicles will be ferried. A part of the fund will also be spent on the infrastructure development of IWTs at Bogibeel, Nematighat, Kamalabari, Silghat, Jogighopa, Silchar and Pandu<sup>34</sup>.

In its attempts to improve Assam's passenger and goods ferry services through Brahmaputra, Barak and other rivers, the Sonowal government submitted an Assam Inland Water Transport (AIWT) Project proposal to the WB seeking financial assistance. In November 2019, the WB granted a loan of \$ 110 million for the AIWT Project to be implemented by the Assam government. Under this project, the infrastructure of the ferry services in Assam will be overhauled<sup>35</sup>.

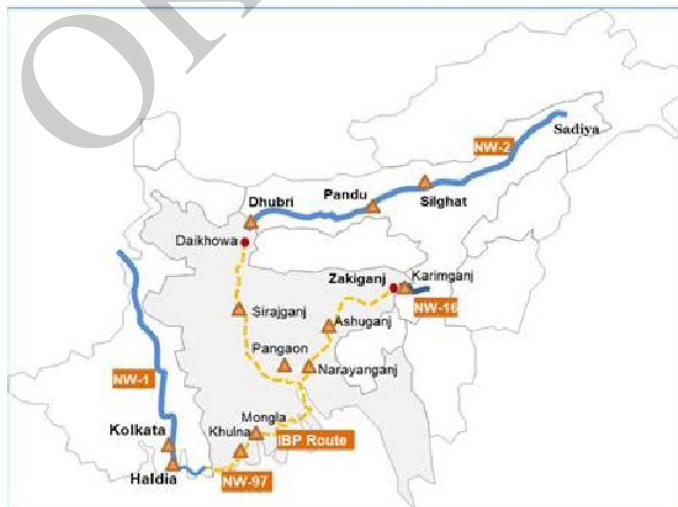
To make Assam's inland water transport both attractive and passenger-friendly, better-

designed terminals and energy efficient vessels will be introduced. To ensure inland water transport more reliable and safer, better navigation aid, appropriate safety gear and suitable marine engines will be used<sup>36</sup>. The process of modernisation also includes procurement of new Search and Rescue (SAR) vessels, up gradation of state's IWTs, retrofitting of existing vessels and institutional capacity development. The initiative has been designed to realise vast potential of Assam's water transport system, which had remained underutilised<sup>37</sup>.

Assam's ferry services are crucial for the people living in both the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. The project has been given priority as inland water transport being considered as eco-friendly, economic and convenient mode of transport and is aimed at boosting regional connectivity and access to the remote areas<sup>38</sup>. Experts have suggested that to ensure safe navigation using electronic charts, night navigation equipments and Differential Global Positioning Systems (DGPPS) stations along the rivers like Brahmaputra and Barak have to be installed and maintained properly. Besides, Assam's IWTs are to be equipped with modern cargo handling machineries (De 16 October 2019).

The up gradation of the state's water transport infrastructure and increased activities through the river routes will generate new business and job opportunities. Initially, the AIWT Project will be made operational at Mjuli and Guwahati. Assam's Majuli, the largest river island in the world and a designated United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Heritage Site, could be developed as a heritage tourism circle attracting tourists from the region and neighbouring countries. River cruise services will be launched from Guwahati to Jorhat and back.

#### NW-2 and Indo-Bangla IWT Routes



Source: Inland Waterways Authority of India

As a part of its attempt to boost the AEP, the Assam government is also pitching for the improvement of sub-regional inland waterways connectivity with Bangladesh. Following the declaration of the Sadiya-Dhubri route as NW-2, the cargo movement through the Brahmaputra has increased to an extent even though facing challenges. Recent reports suggest that export to Bangladesh through IWT has gone up. Dhubri is now fully connected to Narayanganj and there has been regular transportation of cargo vessels through the route. Bhutan is also using this route for trade with Bangladesh (De 16 October 2019). A map showing NW-2 and Indo-Bangla IWT routes is given above

The up gradation of IWT between Assam and Bangladesh will expand trade, create investment opportunities, boost tourism and stimulate economic development. It is estimated that more than 600 million people in India and Bangladesh live along the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers. Besides, millions more live around navigable tributaries (Ahmad 2019). The restoration of the British era IWT routes and their linkages with coastal shipping will substantially increase international trade boosting Assam's economy.

The expansion of waterway connectivity between India and South and South East Asian countries to enhance trade is also a key objective of the AEP. In June 2015, India inked Coastal Shipping Agreement with Bangladesh allowing direct movement of vessels between ports in both the countries instead of a via third country. Along with the agreement, the two sides renewed the 1972 Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade for five more years for boosting trade and commerce through river routes. The current protocol is valid up to March 2020 with a clause for automatic renewal. In view of the Assam government's persistent demands to revive the old waterway links between the NER and Bangladesh, talks are on to start steamer service from Guwahati to Dhaka (Bhattacharjee 2015).

According to the Indo-Bangla protocol, the vessel of either country could travel through specified river routes in the other country. There 4 river routes and 5 ports of call in each country designated under the protocol. Among the ports of call in each country, 3 are from Assam, namely, Karimganj, Pandu and Silghat<sup>39</sup>. Of the 4 river routes, 3 pass through Assam's rivers. They include:

- a. Kolkata - Haldia - Raimangal - Chalna - Khulna - Mongla - Kaukhali - Barisal - Hizla - Chandpur - Narayanganj - Aricha - Sirajganj - Bahadurabad - Chilmari - Dhubri - Pandu - Silghat; and vice versa (Total one-way length: 1720 km)
- b. Kolkata - Haldia - Raimangal - Mongla - Kaukhali - Barisal - Hizla - Chandpur - Narayanganj - Bhairab Bazar - Ajmiraganj - Markuli - Sherpur - Fenchuganj - Zakiganj - Karimganj; and vice versa (Total one-way length: 1318 km)
- c. Karimganj - Zakiganj - Fenchuganj - Sherpur - Markuli - Ajmiraganj - Bhairab Bazar - Narayanganj - Chandpur - Aricha - Sirajganj - Bahadurabad - Chilmari - Dhubri - Pandu - Silghat; and vice versa (Total one-way length: 1416 km)<sup>40</sup>.

Recent reports say the IWAI has already begun bulk cargo to Assam through the Indo-Bangla Protocol Routes (IBPRs). However, only a few Indian transit cargos are operating through the IBPRs due to less depth available mainly in Bangladesh's Sirajganj-Daikhowa and Ashuganj-Zakiganj segments during dry season. Several sections of the rivers both in Bangladesh and India have to be dredged and deepened to facilitate movement of containerised cargo. To address this issue, India and Bangladesh in their bilateral talks on inland waterways and coastal shipping in October 2018 agreed to undertake dredging work in these segments with India funding 80% of the project<sup>41</sup>.

The land-locked and isolated NER has long been demanding access to Bangladesh's Chittagong, Mongla and Ashuganj ports for transportation of goods. There is a good opportunity to transport food grain through the IBPRs as it will be much cheaper than sending by road and railways. In order to strengthen IWT between the two countries, New Delhi and Dhaka signed 3 Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) on October 25-26, 2018. The most important of them was the signing of agreements for the use of Chittagong and Mongla ports for movement of goods from India's NER (D'Silva 2018). This development assumes significance for Assam as the NW-2 will be directly connected to Chittagong and Mongla ports providing much needed alternative mode of transportation of goods from and to the state.

New Delhi and Dhaka also finalised Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for movement of passengers and cruise vessels on the IBPRs and coastal shipping routes. Moreover, the two sides agreed to declare Badarpur on river Barak as an extended port of call of Karimganj in Assam and Ghorasal of Ashuganj in Bangladesh on a reciprocal basis. It was further agreed in the bilateral meeting that a Joint Technical Committee would explore the possibility of the reconstruction and opening up of Jangipur navigational lock on river Bhagirathi subject to the provisions of the 1996 Farraka Agreement. The operationalisation of this route will reduce the distance to Assam by more than 450 km on the IBPRs (D'Silva 2018).

### **The Proposed Dredging of Brahmaputra**

In its bids to address the problems of perennial flood and continuous soil erosion on both banks of the mighty Brahmaputra and enhance navigation through the 891 km-long NW-2, the Assam government has decided to undertake dredging. The Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries carry large amount of sediment during flood every year resulting in the rise of river bed and increase of river width. The dredging will dig out sediments from the river bed and enhance water retention capacity of the river. Consequently, the pressure on the banks will be reduced minimising occurrences of flood and soil erosion<sup>42</sup>.

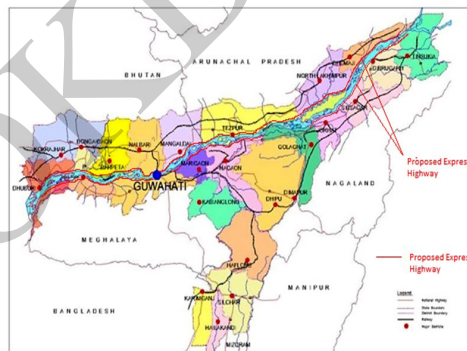
The Union Ministry of Jal Shakti and Social Justice and Empowerment has pointed out that the Brahmaputra is one of the highest sediment carrying rivers in the country. The IWAI needs to undertake regular dredging to maintain required Least Available

Depth (LAD) of 2.5 metre between Dhubri and Neamati; 2.0 metre depth between Neamati and Dibrugarh and 1.5 metre depth between Dibrugarh and Oriumghat<sup>43</sup>.

On August 23, 2016, the state government held a meeting under the chairmanship of the chief minister on the proposal of dredging of Brahmaputra and its tributaries and decided to start the process in consultation with IWAI and Dredging Corporation of India (DCI)<sup>44</sup>. The IWAI will undertake dredging of Brahmaputra from Sadiya to Dhubri in phased manner. The project will start from Sadiya in the eastern tip of Assam. The dredging operation will be extended up to its confluence with the Bay of Bengal in Bangladesh<sup>45</sup>.

The proper maintenance of embankments along Brahmaputra and its tributaries has also been accorded due importance. Former Minister for MoRTH Nitin Gadkari during his visit to Guwahati in December 30, 2017, asked the state government to take immediate steps to revamp the entire network of embankments measuring about 4,474 km and make them road-cum-dykes. Reports say along with the dredging, a 1300 km-long Brahmaputra Express Highway would be built along the northern and southern banks using the sand extracted from dredging and make the express highway attractive for tourists. In early 2017, an agreement was signed in Guwahati between the Government of Assam, National Highway Authority of India and IWAI in this regard<sup>46</sup>. A map showing the alignment of the proposed Brahmaputra Express Highway is given below:

#### **Brahmaputra Express Highway**



*Source: Government of Assam*

#### **Up Gradation of Air Connectivity**

Assam has made big strides in the arena of air connectivity in the recent years. A number of steps including introduction of new air connectivity scheme, opening of air routes between Guwahati and foreign capitals and renovation of the Guwahati airport have been undertaken to promote the AEP. Moreover, Assam's Industry and Commerce Minister Chandra Mohan Patowary, who also heads the Act East Department, said

that the state government has decided to upgrade and revive 55 air strips throughout the state. The British built all the air strips during the World War II; but most of them were abandoned later for various reasons (Guha 2018).

The improvement of air connectivity within the NER is equally important since the other states are connected to the major Indian cities by air only through Guwahati. In October 2016, the Union Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) launched the Ure Desh Ka Aam Nagarik (UDAN) programme under the Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS) for improving air connectivity in the NER. As per the scheme, most of the air routes will be subsidised to ensure that the cost of flying is affordable to the majority of the people<sup>47</sup>.

In its efforts to boost the AEP, the Assam government has formulated an ambitious plan to connect Guwahati by air with the capitals of BBIN and ASEAN countries. In November 2018, the MoCA approved the international air connectivity scheme linking Guwahati with six foreign destinations. They include: Dhaka, Kathmandu, Yangon, Singapore, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur<sup>48</sup>. A map showing air routes connecting Guwahati is given below:

#### Air Routes Connecting Guwahati



Source: *The Strait Times*

The UDAN Scheme offers financial assistance to airlines to improve connectivity among Indian states and international destinations. The Assam government has decided to provide Rs 100 crore Viability Gap Funding (VGF) per annum for 3 years to boost tourism and industrial investment in the state. In the NER, Assam is the first state to offer funds for the UDAN Scheme International. The plan envisages transforming Lokopriya Gopinath Bordoloi International (LGBI) Airport as one of air hubs linking

South East Asia<sup>49</sup>.

In a major development on September 29, 2018, the Royal Bhutan Airlines started a new non-stop air service between Guwahati and Singapore and back. The introduction of the new route is a part of the Air Service Agreement signed between India and Bhutan on the eve of golden jubilee celebration marking fifty years (1957-2007) of diplomatic relations between the two neighbours<sup>50</sup>.

The opening of the Guwahati-Singapore air service will boost trade, investment and tourism between the NER especially Assam and South East Asian countries. Singapore, an influential ASEAN member, is optimistic about the future prospects of the new air link. India is the third largest tourism source market for Singapore and this new air service would further strengthen cultural and socio-political ties between countries and create opportunities for trade and commerce<sup>51</sup>.

The improvement of air connectivity between Guwahati, the business capital of the NER, and the neighbouring countries is a remarkable step towards the realisation of the goals envisaged in the AEP. In the last two years, Guwahati has got connected to two more foreign capitals. On July 1, 2019, the first Guwahati-Dhaka flight was flagged off. Again on September 22, 2019, former Assam Chief Minister Sonowal inaugurated the Guwahati-Bangkok air service. He noted that the new air route would immensely contribute to the renewal of cultural and commercial ties between India especially Assam and Thailand<sup>52</sup>.

The new air service has generated enthusiasm among the business leaders of the NER about the prospects of expanding trade and investment between India and Thailand, which has a robust market. A key Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) functionary based at Guwahati remarked that the opening of the new air route is the first major development on the AEP front. He said some sectors such as health, education and tourism would benefit from better connectivity with South East Asia<sup>53</sup>.

Another positive development related to the enhancement of air connectivity of the NER is the up gradation of the LGBI Airport at Guwahati—the region's busiest air transit point. The LGBI Airport has been expanded and renovated several times since its establishment in 1958. The ongoing project to develop Guwahati's new integrated terminal was undertaken in 2017 and is likely to be completed by 2021<sup>54</sup>. The regular up gradation of the infrastructure of the LGBI Airport has become necessary in view of the significant rise in volume of air traffic over the years.

Most of the airlines operate daily flights between Guwahati and all metros of India via Kolkata and New Delhi. The airport is fast turning into one of the busiest airports. In 2017, it handled more than 3.7 million passengers, an increase of 36% from 2016<sup>55</sup>. It is expected that in the coming days, the LGBI Airport will play an instrumental role

in broadening and deepening of ties between India's North East and neighbouring countries adding fresh momentum to the AEP.

### **Building of Multi-Modal Transport System and Logistics Park**

In its bids to promote the AEP, both the union and state governments have initiated the process of constructing multi-modal transport system inter-connecting roadways, railways, waterways and airways in Assam and linking it with the existing transport networks of the neighbouring countries. It is a major step towards integrating the NER especially Assam with the markets of neighbouring countries. Such an initiative has been taken for the first time in the landlocked NER. As part of the AEP, some selected areas of Assam will be developed as centres of trade, transit and connectivity.

Under the proposed North East EC Project, 7 IWTs on the Brahmaputra will be renovated. These IWTs will be further up graded as multi-modal transport hubs with all modern facilities for transshipment of goods from road to rail to waterways for seamless movement of industrial and agricultural products saving time and cost. The NFR has already initiated steps to upgrade Silghat as the first multi-modal transport hub of central Assam<sup>56</sup>.

In order to lessen logistics costs and improve the efficiency of transportation of goods and commodities, the union government has decided to develop Multi-Modal Logistics Park (MMLP) and sought ADB's assistance to carry out MMLP pre-feasibility studies at selected locations, including Jogighopa in Assam. The ADB in its study report suggested development of transport infrastructure for the proposed Jogighopa MMLP, including up gradation and widening of NH-17 from Bongaigaon to Guwahati via Jogighopa. The ADB report also recommended for the improvement of the Dalu-Gelepu road, which will facilitate trade between Bangladesh and Bhutan through Jogighopa and an aggregation and distribution point for international trade and transit cargo<sup>57</sup>.

Reports say the Assam government has already confirmed land availability and Detailed Project Report (DPR) is in progress. The country's first multi-modal hub would be set up at Jogighopa at a cost of nearly Rs 600 crore. Jogighopa, which has a road-cum-rail bridge over the Brahmaputra, is set to emerge as India's first gateway to BBIN and ASEAN countries as well as rest of the NER with the government pushing for the up gradation of roadways, railways, waterways and airways facilities at the proposed hub<sup>58</sup>.

Along with the initiatives to develop multi-modal transport network in Assam, steps have been taken to further improve Guwahati's connectivity within the NER and with neighbouring countries. Guwahati is the most important city in the NER and acts as transit point between the region and rest of the country. Therefore, the up gradation of the existing roadways, railways, waterways and airways connecting Guwahati is

essential for promoting the AEP. Guwahati is connected by roads, rail, waterways and air. The city is connected to a number of NHs: 31 and 37 link the city with the north-western states of India, while 40 and other state highways connect it with the rest of the North Eastern states<sup>59</sup>.

### **Challenges Facing the Infrastructure Development Projects**

Despite government's efforts to push the infrastructure development of India's NER, several problems have delayed the implementation of the ongoing projects. While a few issues are unique to North East, the others are common in rest of India. Some of the challenges confronting the transport infrastructure development projects of the NER include: difficult terrain, incessant rainfall, militant activities, unstable geological features, slow land acquisition process, endemic corruption, lengthy environment and forest clearance process, ecological issues, anti-government movements and resource crunch.

Excessive rainfall in the NER seriously hampers the progress of work of the infrastructure projects. Frequent flooding of Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries during monsoon renders construction work virtually impossible for 6-7 months in the plains of Assam. Even unseasonal rains pose engineering challenge for deep foundation and high embankments (Kukreja 2016). Heavy rainfall results in repeated landslides and ground sinking making the task difficult for workers and causing delays in transportation of construction materials and equipments. This is a common scenario noticed in the NER especially in the hilly regions leading to delay in execution of the projects and escalation of their cost.

The seemingly unending insurgency also seriously affects the implementation of the transport infrastructure development projects in the NER. The militants run parallel economy in states like Manipur and Nagaland where road and rail projects are facing problems. The militants often threaten locals working in the projects and also extort money from contractors and government officials leading to uncertainty and delay in implementation of the projects. The overall law and order of the NER has improved to an extent in the recent years; but the situation in Manipur and Nagaland continue to be an issue of concern. The roads between Dimapur and Imphal and from Imphal to Moreh are most vulnerable to militant activities.

Sluggish land acquisition process is another serious issue confronting the connectivity development projects especially railways. The ongoing rail projects in Nagaland and Manipur got delayed due to this reason. The fear of influx of illegal immigrants among the indigenous people in Meghalaya has also impeded the execution of ongoing projects. A few organisations of Meghalaya did not allow the survey work for the Byrnihat-Shillong Rail Project to be completed apprehending that the improvement of connectivity will lead to the entry of illegal immigrants.

Sometimes delay in releasing funds or completion of official formalities adversely affects the implementation of the projects. This happens in case of India's infrastructure development projects undertaken in the neighbouring countries. Factors like bureaucratic lethargy and red tapism stall the progress of implementation of the infrastructure development projects. Under such circumstances, India's goodwill as development partner suffers a setback.

Another Asian giant China is also engaged in the infrastructure development of South and South East Asian countries and competes with India for influence and promotion of economic interests. China takes advantage of India's dilly-dallying approach and completes the projects much faster displaying its economic prowess. In the recent years, India has lost much of its traditional influence in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Maldives facilitating China's emergence as a major infrastructure developer in the region.

The prevalence of rampant corruption in transport infrastructure development projects is also a matter of worry. This happens mainly in the road projects involving Assam's PWD. The state government officials' involvement in corrupt practices often hinders proper implementation of the projects. Sometimes, ecological issues also impede the renovation/repair of roads. A number of national and state highways pass through sensitive reserve forest areas of Assam where the animal rights groups are active. They register cases requesting immediate halt of work if it is perceived to be threatening the life of endangered species. The Green Tribunal's rulings have stopped works in some parts of Assam in the recent years.

Another big challenge is the dredging of the Brahmaputra with some quarters raising technical and ecological issues. A technical team from the DCI visited Assam in September 2016 and recommended that a thorough morphological and hydrological study of the river is required to find out the possibilities of dredging its enormous silt deposits. Experts are of the opinion that dredging along a particular width of a channel along the Brahmaputra for navigation will not provide a permanent solution to the problems of recurring flood and soil erosion. They say the mighty Brahmaputra and its several tributaries carry massive silt with their flow, about 1.8 billion tonnes per year (Akhtar 2017).

They reason that it is impossible to make the river bed free from silt accumulation by dredging, unless an effective mechanism is applied to capture and dispose of the silt load flowing into the mainstream from its tributaries. Failing to do so will lead to the accumulation of fresh silt immediately. So they argue that undertaking dredging may not be economically viable. Besides, dredging poses a major threat to the aquatic lives of the Brahmaputra and the surrounding national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. Therefore, environmentalists insist that a comprehensive ecological impact assessment study must be done before undertaking dredging (Akhtar 2017).

The Modi government's domestic political agenda and foreign policy objectives sometimes work at cross purpose adversely impacting the infrastructure development initiatives in the NER. In the wake of the violent protest demonstrations across Assam against the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) during November-December 2019, the Japan government postponed the annual summit with India. Reports suggest that the prime ministers of both the countries were expected to meet on December 15-16 and Guwahati was chosen as one of the venues of the summit. The postponement was a major setback for the NER as Japan agreed to invest Rs 13,000 crore in several infrastructure projects of the region<sup>60</sup>.

Japan has emerged as a key development partner of India's NER. Since 2011, Japan has been providing aid for the region's infrastructure development. The infusion of Japanese assistance increased after 2014. The Act East Forum, a bilateral coordination mechanism, was established two years back with the objective of ushering economic development in the NER<sup>61</sup>.

The current union government's internal contradiction between the domestic and foreign policy issues especially related to the AEP also had a destabilising effect on the Indo-Bangladesh friendly ties. The controversies triggered by the recent National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise in Assam and the politically-motivated anti-Bangladesh statements of some of the leaders of the Modi government invited people's wrath and the Hasina government's displeasure across the borders. Besides, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has created misunderstanding in the neighbouring country. Both the issues have become irritants in the bilateral relations which otherwise witnessed a major upswing ever since Sheikh Hasina assumed power in 2009.

### **Conclusions**

The recent thrust on improving connectivity in the NER reflects the Indian ruling elites' shift from the traditional security-oriented to development-centric approach towards this peripheral region of the country. In the context of globalisation and fast changing regional and global geo-political dynamics, New Delhi's policy makers have been compelled to upgrade the isolated NER's transport infrastructure and its linkages with the neighbouring countries to integrate the region with some of the fastest growing markets of ASEAN and BBIN. However, the union government has to immediately amend its dismal execution record of transport infrastructure development projects in the NER. Instead of indulging in political rhetoric and propagating its achievements, the government should focus on creating a synergy between domestic and foreign policies taking all stake holders into confidence.

Assam could be transformed into the centre-point of the AEP due to its resource potentials and fairly developed transport network. The state needs a breakthrough after suffering from prolonged insurgency. It is important that the government now fast track the pending projects in view of the recent improvement in the insurgency

situation across the state. Given Assam's sensitivities on some core issues, for example illegal migration, the current political dispensation at the centre should eschew from pursuing divisive political agenda disturbing social cohesion and stability. Many quarters of Assam including academicians, journalists and entrepreneurs apprehend that violence and uncertainty stemming from the controversial CAA could become a serious impediment to the implementation of the AEP. The incumbent union government should realise that the prospects of improved connectivity outweigh the challenges and take a holistic yet pragmatic approach for all-round development of the state.

## Appendix

### Policy Implications

The foregoing analysis brings out certain policy implications which have critical scaring on the success of AEP integrating NER with global space.

- A. The government should expedite the land acquisition process involving several road and railway projects. Similarly, it should fast track forest and environment clearance procedures without bypassing existing norms. The government must also address the local issues facing the ongoing railway projects especially in Meghalaya. It is the government's responsibility to take the indigenous organisations into confidence that the development of transport infrastructure will bring about significant change in the local people's livelihood and prosperity. This is one of the most important objectives of the AEP.
- B. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs has to reinvigorate the peace process in the insurgency affected parts of North East to bring about sustainable development in the region. The improvement of transport infrastructure in the insurgency-ridden areas will galvanise economic growth. So the government has to remove the hurdles impeding the ongoing projects. To realise the goals envisaged in the AEP, the improvement of connectivity throughout the NER is essential and this could be realised only when peace and stability are fully restored in the region.
- C. The elimination of corrupt practices involving the road projects is also urgently needed. Irregularities and adoption of unfair means in the construction/renovation of the roads in Assam often cause delay leading to severe public inconveniences. The Assam government must revamp the PWD to make it more transparent and accountable. The state government has to realise that there is an immediate need to change the corrupt mindset of the officials and improve internal governance for effective implementation of the AEP.
- D. Another infrastructure bottleneck that needs to be removed without further delay is the poor inter-state road linkages in the NER. Several state roads connecting Assam with neighbouring states are in deplorable state. The intra-

regional movement of cargo and passenger vehicles sometimes become a nightmare in such dilapidated roads. The governments of the North Eastern states are indifferent towards many inter-state roads lying in the remote and peripheral areas. Since the Assam government is pushing the AEP, it could take the initiative to renovate such roads by devising an effective institutional coordination mechanism with the concerned state ensuring seamless movement of cargo and passenger.

- E. India should also fast track the transport infrastructure development projects undertaken in neighbouring countries especially Bangladesh and Myanmar. Moreover, to boost trade and people-to-people ties between NER and ASEAN and BBIN countries as part of the AEP, the MEA has to ensure speedy completion of the ongoing trans-border and inter-regional connectivity projects. The early operationalisation of the India-Myanmar-Thailand TH is important for enhancing Indo-ASEAN trade. The TH could be made operational only after the 3 countries implement a motor vehicle agreement. Furthermore, New Delhi should step up efforts to operationalise the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement in consultation with the concerned countries as early as possible.
- F. Bangladesh is an important eastern neighbour and India requires its crucial cooperation to implement several cross-border connectivity projects initiated under the AEP. Therefore, it is in New Delhi's interest not to generate any unnecessary controversy stemming from its domestic politics and respect Bangladesh's sensitivities. This is more so because New Delhi also needs Bangladesh's support to contain China's growing foot prints in the South Asian region, which is considered as India's own backyard.

These aspects assume significance on the eve of Modi's much awaited visit to Dhaka on March 26-27, 2021, to celebrate Bangladesh's fifty years of independence and bilateral relations with India. In the recent months, India has given a big push to boost connectivity with the neighbouring country aiming at forging a strategic partnership under the vision of Indo-Pacific cooperation. Foreign policy analysts maintain that India seeks to take connectivity to the "next level" in the Bay of Bengal region, which is increasingly becoming the focal point of the Indo-Pacific strategy<sup>62</sup>. It is expected that New Delhi's decision makers will adopt an inclusive approach factoring the NER in India's foreign policy priorities.

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## Book Review

### Resource, Politics and Northeast India

Arunima Deka<sup>1</sup>

*Living with Oil and Coal Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India*  
(2019) Dolly Kikon. University of Washington Press: USA, pp. 188.

An anthropologist to reckon with, Dolly Kikon has made a mark in the field of academics with extensive research on the northeast region of India. Her recent work '*Living with Oil and Coal Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India*' is an outcome of her arduous research in this area. It is probably author's personal reflection on the region's long history of militarization, violence, abject poverty, insecurity with parallel extraction operations taking place here that lead her to produce this work so engrossing with anthropological insights and theoretical reflections. This is a work which accounts how borders are produced and maintained. It depicts how security, commerce, border disputes occurs simultaneously in spaces dotted by strong ethnic ties. In borderland, resource rich territories between Assam and Nagaland, the author accounts the key nodes of interaction amongst local people. Her work is an astute combination of theoretical debates and references as much as storytelling. It can be read and enjoyed not only by those in academe but also anyone interested in having an idea about lives in borderlands specially those areas marked by rich resources. The book is divided into seven chapters with an introduction and epilogue.

In her introduction, Kikon narrates the borderland politics situated around commodities like bamboo, timber, coal etc. This marks the relation between the state of Assam and Nagaland where people, state and non-state actors interact centering around resource. These border gates, checkpoints or the numerous nomenclature used to refer to the boundary demarcation has been existent since the colonial times when the British first introduced the Inner Line Regulation in 1873. The colonial instrument was devised to distinguish between the hills of Nagas and the plains of Assam, figuratively between the savage and the civilized and importantly to safeguard the resources. Kikon traverses the world of many borders herself witnessing the 'political drama' (p. 7) in the resource frontiers and its effects on daily lives of people. It speaks of relation between people, also the state and the non state actors provides us with rich

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ethnographic insights and stories often unheard, of coal, oil, murder, love and many more. Set in the background of political economy of resource extractions, the people of these areas are also witness to decades of violence and armed struggle along with abject poverty, and this is where they see mines and oils fields as a solution to their economic hardship which would usher progress and development. Kikon sees in these spaces the dreams of a 'desired future', which definitely leads to conflict and competition amongst various actors tribal bodies, private owners, mining companies, state officials, insurgents thus forming newer alliances and politics around it. The author beautifully weaves series of events, histories, legends in negotiating these landscape marked by oil field, tea plantation and how common people conduct their daily lives in face of various levels of surveillance and security checks, citing the example of weekly haat (market) which sustains socio economic ties but susceptible to conflicts when they are shut down and trading stops. The lives in these resource frontiers are closely tied to the issue of citizenship, sovereignty as with security and larger human rights issues as Kikon goes on to narrate.

In her first chapter 'Storytellers' talks of the overlapping claim over territories in these foothills which falls within territorial and administrative jurisdiction of three states Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. She illuminates her anthropological discoveries of two villages Old and New Tssori found in colonial gazettes and notifications preserved by an influential village member whose great grandfather was one of the founders of these villages. Similarly Longtssori, Gorejan and probably numerous such villages speak of the same story of memory, history, claims of belonging, record, documentation and unending official procedure of recognition by government. This process is exacerbated by the race for resource excavation, overlapping claims of boundaries, existence of multiple ethnic groups seeking employment, land and resources and claims each with own history. These in turn become grounds for cultural and political alliances as we see in contemporary politics in Assam and the role of Assam Tea Tribes Student's Association (ATTSA), All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA) and various such groups.

The second chapter 'Difficult Loves' takes us on a journey of something more intimate. The author in this chapter has invoked certain ideas which are possible only for anthropologists to depict. Here Kikon highlights the idea of love (*morom*) through stories of marriage, domestic violence in 'domestic, ethnic, religion and geographical' spaces and how this idea, she finds, is intimately connected with male ownership and gender relations. This idea also illustrates the 'social and moral boundaries of ethnic communities' which is very pertinent to maintaining relations of power.

The third chapter 'State Loves', talks of the multiplicity of definition when people invoke the institution called state. It is a multilayered understanding wherein sometimes it is referred to as 'a sinful sovereign entity' and at other 'multiple sovereign bodies and power structures, such as the tribal councils, insurgent groups, and Indian security forces' (p. 63). This chapter talks of the everyday dilemma of ordinary people residing

particularly in the foothills and borders of these two states. The author shows us how sovereignty is also socially constructed and here in such spaces maintained not solely by the state but also non state actors like insurgent groups. Ordinary lives are also ruled by the kind of 'love' extended or not extended by their respective state jurisdiction, so sometimes lack of water, security, public subsidies, schools and hospitals all become markers of a caring state. Kikon here elucidates the construction and characterization of state of Assam as an economic power compared to Nagaland, Nagaland in turn as a cultural state and the Indian state as a military authority. Because of the centrality of resource extraction and the aim of having some control over them, the terms of engagement becomes important for the residents in these foothills.

The fourth chapter 'The *Haats*' shows us the centrality of this important institution in socio economic lives of the people residing in these areas, a 'vital sign of the social life' (p. 87). Kikon shows us how these *Haats* are spaces of historical, political and cultural associations. It is space, an amalgamation of people, goods, aroma, food, and motley of color yet underneath runs strong currents of tension too. It further highlights the hills and plains divide, wherein the people of the hill narrate their hard toil in carrying goods to the *haats* and also power hierarchies and relations inherent in these transactions.

The fifth chapter 'Extractive Relations' highlights the fluidity of borders demarcating these two states, where tea gardens and *jhum* fields marked the areas of Assam and Nagaland. The author portrays a picture of anxious relations between these states and also in the mining activities, which in case of Nagaland is a seasonal activity. It involved a huge network of traders, landowners, villagers, state government, insurgent groups and many others. Interestingly what the author highlights through such activities like coal mining is the forging of different kinds of friendship and kinship ties across communities in these foothills. These ties in the face of an extractive economy are something interesting to know about and the way people negotiate ethnic tensions and relations of power, and continue with their lives.

The sixth chapter 'Carbon Fantasies and Aspirations' brings up the debate around community ownership of natural resources and how people and various other stakeholders have been interpreting this relation which is very important for future politics and aspirations of people. For instance the exploration of oil by ONGC between 1973 and 1993 ignited the fantasies of people 'about a prosperous carbon future and potential benefits from oil exploration' (p. 120). It started forming newer alliances and power networks and understandings about ownership and access to natural resources steering the debate around Article 371 A of the Indian Constitution. Interestingly, the author here also explores the gender relation in the Naga society and the way mining sites further entrenched the gendered inequality, already existent in the society. Women's lives were deeply impacted by these mining activities which remain a 'man talk', and women were excluded from it. Furthermore, their conventional spaces are also under threat from the ever expanding activities of coal sites.

The seventh chapter 'Carbon Citizenship' highlights the interaction between Indian security forces and ordinary lives in these areas. The author reflects on a peculiar relation of 'extraction, citizenship, and militarism' in this chapter. A reader in this chapter is exposed to a narrative of security built up by the Indian state and how constitutional regulations like Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) and Disturbed Areas Act is at work and the activities under the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Act are being taken up as an effort to reach people. These various ways of reaching people has built up a process of shaping 'model citizens' '*bhal manu*' floating a whole new debate around canon citizenship in the backdrop of a violent history of resource extraction which continues.

Finally in the Epilogue the author succinctly reiterates the argument made in her previous chapters of dreams fueled by resource extraction which is marked by violence and militarization in the whole region. Her work very aptly depicts the lives of ordinary people living a 'carbon dream' amidst control and militarization and how land and resources are viewed by various stakeholders- the state and non state actors, people, insurgents, ethnic groups and so on. The stakeholders are many, so are dreams, the heartrending story of an English school narrated by the author depicts the picture.

Kikon makes interesting observation about the scenario of resource extraction in the region with elaborate anthropological exploration of places in the foothills of Assam and Nagaland. The merit of the author is in aptly depicting the everyday lives and struggles of the ordinary people involved in this politics. It is a story of varied nuances of politics and militarization of these areas and how multiple actors, the state, non state and even insurgent groups, have a bearing on the developments surrounding resource politics. In the growing field of borderland studies this work highlights people's emotions and sentiments around resource excavation and ownership. It is an intellectual addition to the plethora of works on the region and its resource politics but stands out because of the ability to reflect the otherwise mundane events of everyday lives, like a *Haat, a Jhum* session, yet politically very pertinent in describing the relation between the communities residing in the carbon landscape. Kikon successfully depicts the lives of ordinary people entangled in carbon fantasies. However, some reflection on the elite formation within the tribal communities and how they along with the state machinery has appropriated the opportunity provided by the discovery and exploration of resources to which both the state and community lay their strong claims for, could have further enriched the book. This work will inspire many more scholars to take up fresh research in this area whose historicity entwined with colonial legacy nonetheless remains relevant in contemporary times.

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## Book Review

### Radical Politics in Tripura

Dhanmoni Kalita<sup>1</sup>

*Radical Politics and Governance in India's North East: The Case of Tripura*, by Harihar Bhattacharyya, London, Routledge, 2018, xiv+252 pp., Price not mentioned, ISBN978-1-138-66872-0.

The politics of post-independent North East India is filled with conflicts over ethnicity and identity. While the 'fear of being small number' and losing the cultural and traditional heritage at the hands of 'immigrants' have reckoned the politics, the self-determination of tribal life has also played a major role in its politics. The princely state of Tripura which came under the rule of the Government of India in the post-partition independent India was largely a tribal dominated state till 1941 with 50.09 percent of tribal population of the total population, but in 1951 tribal population decreased to 34 percent. Unlike all other North East Indian states, Tripura is the only state where the left politics was a success. Discussing on such vital issues, the book- *Radical Politics and Governance in India's North East: The Case of Tripura* by Harihar Bhattacharyya revolves around the Marxist framework of the rise of radical (left) politics in Tripura. It is divided into twelve chapters and also includes an Introduction and Conclusion.

The book begins with a discussion on the theoretical aspects of Marxism as well as its relation with the national and ethnic questions in India. The first chapter foregrounds the theoretical backdrop against which the book has been conceived. The author has drawn a comparison of left politics in all other North East Indian states to show how Tripura has witnessed a successful left politics. In the second chapter, the author analyses the result of ethnic politics in North East India and how this has resulted in creation of new state or grant of autonomy in many tribal areas. It provides a brief outline of civil disturbances in several parts of north eastern India with the rise of ethnic politics due to the diversities in terms of languages, religions and territorial differences. In the third chapter, the author has attempted to show how several rebel groups emerged out of the ethnic politics and later joined the democratic process through peace accords and negotiations (p. 56).

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Founded in the fifteenth century, Tripura Kingdom came under direct British control under a political agent in 1871, since then remained as a princely state till its accession to Indian on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1949. Being a neighbouring area of Bengal, Tripura received the large-scale migration of Bengali population which sometimes received king's patronage in return for higher rent on land, and the Bengali language was even accepted as the court language. Tracing the history of the growth of the Bengali population in the state, the author dealt with the changing agrarian structure of Tripura resulting out of migration and changed agrarian practices brought about by the migrants. (Chapter 4)

In most cases in the agrarian society, the revolt or popular discontent is the result of high taxation which is also seen in case of Tripura when the Reang and Noatia tribes revolted against the king as they were subjected to higher taxation, sometimes six times higher than the ruling Tripuri tribe. The revolt awakened the ruling princely power leading further radical politics in the region (Chapter 5). In the meantime, along with the rise of the communist movement in other parts of India, it also started in Tripura in 1938. The sixth chapter discusses at length the process of the inroads of communists in Tripura with the help of the Bengalis and adapted itself with the radical ethnic politics that had already emerged in Tripura. Reformatory organisations emerged as a precursor of a left politics in Tripura which demanded responsible government under the Monarch.

In chapter seven, the author provides a vivid analysis and shows how in a small state like Tripura, an agrarian radicalism emerged after the Independence as had been witnessed in many other parts of India. Already in Tripura like Assam, a state in North East India, a form of agrarian radicalism emerged and continued till 1951-1952.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, with the rise of left radical politics, there emerged the politics of ethno nationalism based mainly on the language which, however, had its own limitations (Chapter 8). The author devotes the two chapters of his book (Chapter 9 and 10) to discuss the rise and challenges to the communist in electoral politics. While chapter nine shows how the tribal ethno-nationalism was appropriated by the communists and their success in the elections, chapter ten gives an accounts of the rise of a radical ethnic challenge to the left by a tribal party.

Towards the 1970s secessionist forces had emerged in entire North East India and Tripura was no exception. The state went through a period of great turmoil and uncertainty however, came out of the secessionist movement with the signing of a peace accord with these forces followed by a mechanism of the autonomous rule provided under the constitution of India (Chapter 11). This chapter also reflects the dominating influence and appeal of left front in the autonomous areas and this could be seen reflected in the election results. The last chapter of the book sums up the nuances of various issues in governance that led to the success of left front government in Tripura for a long period of time.

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<sup>2</sup> Saikia, Arupjyoti. (2014). *A Century of Protests: Peasant Politics in Assam Since*. New Delhi: Routledge.

The book essentially covers the period of the political history of Tripura from 1947-2018 in terms of the growth of left radical politics in a historical context. Though placed coherently, the pleasure of reading the book is reduced because of several typos and repetitions, perhaps because of lack of revisions and editing (e.g. pp. 54, 88, 94, 145, 189). Nevertheless, the book based on primary sources and empirical evidences is an important contribution for the study of the post-independence political history of Tripura.

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