

CHAPTER-VII

Suggestive Measures and Concluding Observations

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In spite of all development scheme adopted by the Government for the tribals and thousands of crores of rupees spent both by the Central and the State Governments, the tribals are not developed up to the desired level. They are still underdeveloped. They are not at par with that of the other non tribal communities. What could be the reasons behind it? It is because of the fact that our delivery system is not adequate or is it because of the fact that our implementing agencies are not efficient enough to effectively handle the challenges of the tribal development? I think more or less all these factors are responsible.

Some of the remedial measures of tribal development of Assam are:

- Six communities of the State viz. Moran, Motok, Ahom, Chutia, Koch-Rajbongshi, and Tea-tribes are agitating for tribal status in order to get more economic facilities. The failure of the Government of India to take concrete decisions on the issue of including six communities of Assam in the list of scheduled tribes has now snowballed into a major controversy and the agitations by different organizations representing the communities have been turning violent, which is threatening to disturb the social fabric of Assam. All the political parties should join hands to put pressure on the Government of India jointly on this issue if they are really serious about the economic development of the adivasi of Assam. The Assam Legislative Assembly had passed a resolution for granting ST status to six communities of the State and forwards the same to the Centre.
- Assam's ethnic diversity cannot be compared with any other State. It has necessitated creation of six Statuary Autonomous Councils, in addition to the 3 Sixth Schedule Autonomous

District Councils, which are predominantly inhabited by tribal people. The existing infrastructure available in these council areas is very poor and need substantial investments for development. The Planning Commission should provide special package of development for these councils on the pattern of the economic package provided to BTC. The tribal population in the plain districts of the State is around 27 lakhs, which is comparable to the population of the State of Meghalaya. The plan funds available to Meghalaya are far more than the investment for the tribal population under the State Plan of Assam. It is therefore necessary that the special assistance to the tribal sub-plan be suitably increased so that the per capita investment in these tribal areas can also be brought at par with the State of Meghalaya.

- The population of the two hill districts (Sixth Schedule areas) of the State is 10 lakhs. As compared to this, the State of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram, which were carved out of Assam earlier, have a population of 23 lakhs, 20 lakhs and 9 lakhs respectively as per the 2001 Census figures. The plan assistance received by

the two hill districts of Assam (Rs. 286 crore in 2006-07) is comparatively far less than the plan assistance received by Meghalaya Rs. 800 crore), Nagaland (Rs. 685 crore) and Mizoram (Rs. 620 crore). This has resulted in slow development of these areas, generating support for extremist activities and demand for separate statehood. Therefore adequate financial support should be provided to these Councils under Hill Areas Development Programme.

- The pattern and quantum of funding of the present hill area of Assam need to be completely overhauled and made at par with the States of Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland, being a part of a shared geo-political history; meaning that all the expenditure of the Autonomous Council must be defrayed from the revenues collected within the Autonomous Council areas and supplemented and complemented by the Grants-in-aid of the Central Government, award of the Finance Commission, etc. and the required funds must be directly deposited in the accounts of the Autonomous Council, so that controversies over release of fund, quantum of the allocation and proxy spending of the funds

by Dispur are eliminated. If the Central Government has gracefully borne the burden of Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland, the Hill Areas of Assam deserve the same treatment considering the common geo-political history of the said areas.

- The failure of the State Government to release Central funds on time to the BTC is definitely a matter concern and the Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi, who also holds the finance portfolio, should seriously look into the matter to ensure that the BTC gets the funds on time to take up infrastructure development projects. As per the provisions of the MoS, the Centre agreed to provide Rs. 100 crore a year for a period of five years as a special development grant to the BTC and after the expiry of the five year period, the Centre agreed to provide Rs. 50 crore a year for another five years. As the fund is routed through the Assam Government, the BTC authorities are alleging that they do not receive the funds on time and demanded that the Central funds should be sent directly to the Council. The Centre should seriously consider the demand and if there is any reason to believe that the funds are not utilized properly, the Central or

the State Government can think of carrying out a thorough audit by the Accountant General into the financial.

- The Government of India has decided to amend the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India to bring in greater financial discipline in the Autonomous Councils formed under the same, which is a positive step and efforts should be made to make the amendment as soon as possible. But among the Autonomous Councils of Assam, only three – NC Hills Autonomous Council, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and the Bodoland Autonomous Council have been formed under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule and it will be up to the State Government to ensure greater financial discipline in the other Autonomous Councils. The State Government should evolve a mechanism to keep a close watch on the activities of the councils as merely providing funds to the councils will not serve any purpose. Moreover, over the years, the councils are being run by ad-hoc bodies appointed by the Government, which defeated the purpose of devolution of powers and steps should be taken to ensure elections to the councils as soon as possible.

- In recent times large scale irregularities in the Autonomous Councils have come to light, which is a matter of serious concern as the councils were created for the well-being of the downtrodden sections of the society and these pupil are deprived of the fruits of development. In the NC Hills Autonomous Council hundreds of crores of public money were embezzled by a coterie of politicians, officers, and militants have laid bare the magnitude of the scourge. The developments increasingly testify to the fact that the councils are far from serving their avowed objectives. The all-important need, therefore, is to have an effective mechanism for ensuring strict financial discipline. Both the Central and State Government need to monitor strictly the functioning of the councils vis-a vis implementation of projects. The Central Government need to amend in the Sixth Schedule for effecting greater financial discipline in the councils, the State Government will have to evolve its own mechanism in respect of the councils that are not under the Sixth Schedule.
- The Government should carry out an audit of the financial dealings of all the autonomous councils to ensure that funds

earmarked for development works are utilized for the benefit of all sections of the society. The State Government should ensure that the accounts of all Autonomous Councils are audited every year and the reports of the audits should be made public to bring in more transparency in the functioning of the councils. If the Government cannot ensure proper utilization of funds the very propose of creation of Autonomous Councils will be defeated and only a handful of people will be benefited.

- At the time of signing of the accord with organization demanding Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council in the yearly 1990s, the Government promised that Panchayat polls would not be held in the Council area. But instead of taking affective steps to put pressure on the Government of India to amend the Panchayati Raj Act to avoid holding of polls in the autonomous council areas, only recently the State Government has formed a committee to examine the matter and one fails to understand why the Government waited for more than a decade to form such a committee. The Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council area already started witnessing agitations by groups opposing holding

of Panchayat polls and the Rabha students' body has threatened to go to any extent to prevent holding of the polls. The situation in the Council area may deteriorate in the days to come if the Government fails to take a decision. Similarly the people of other autonomous council areas have also started opposing holding of Panchayat polls and only deployment of forces will not be a solution to the problem. Instead of forcibly imposing the Panchayat polls on the people who are opposing the same, the Government should immediately start the process of talks with the organizations opposing the polls to know their minds and should try to find a way out to defuse the situation before it goes out of control.

- It should be considered whether the functioning of the ADCs should be amended to make them more accountable through the insertion of a clause that makes mandatory the creation of village councils/bodies with a degree of representation to the traditional institutions of chiefs and goan buras, without giving the latter any primacy. The politicization of the system in these districts has meant that these institutions are no longer above

politics but deeply immersed in it. The village councils, as in the case of the DCs, should be elected every five years.

- Assam, together with other North-Eastern States, has cut a rather sorry figure in the implementation of Central-sponsored rural development projects, including the flagship programmes such as MGNREGA, PMGSY and IAY. State Government should take necessary step to implement all the flagship programmes of the Central Government and the Autonomous Councils would try to take benefit from these programmes. Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India would take necessary initiative to print out a booklet containing information and guidelines of all schemes of Government of India to circulate to the North Eastern States as there is still lack of awareness in the regard.
- One of the major constraints of tribal development is the lack of public cooperation in the development progress. Therefore, local tribal leaders, specially elected members should be consulted/involved at the various stages of policy making, implementation and evaluation of the tribal development schemes.

- Budgeting and sanctioning of schemes is a major constraint which tries to materialize at the fag end of the financial year. Because of that benefit do not percolate to the tribal people. Therefore, such constraint should be removed through effective planning.
- Positive attitude of the officers and staff responsible for budgeting, preparing proposals, sanctioning of schemes/ proposals and finally implementing the schemes in field is very important. Movement of the files should be strictly monitored and there should not be unnecessarily delay in sanctioning of proposals. Guilty officers/staff should be booked immediately.
- Lack of awareness among the tribals about the developmental plans and programmes is also a major constraint for tribal development. NGOs can play a major role in this regard. They can make the tribal aware of the policies and programmes undertaken by the govt. for their development. NGOs can also help the govt. departments in assessing the impact of the policies and programmes and suggest measures for better implementation of the programmes.

- Insurgency problems are one of the major constraints in the development of the STs in the hill areas of Assam. The hill and plain tribal areas of the State are based of number of extremist groups. Economic development is the right answer to the problem of insurgency and Government of India should formulate and implement a region-specific development strategy and plan aimed at employment generation on priority basis to effectively deal with militancy. Providing job to unemployment and frustrated youth can effectively prevent them from joining the ranks of militant groups of various misplaced ideologies. Tribal unemployed youths should be trained on various income-generating schemes for their self-employment. They should be encouraged in every way to earn for themselves and their families. There is also lack of tribal entrepreneurship among the tribal people. Proper environment should be created and tribal should be encouraged to take up small-scale industries based on locally available raw materials. The Government should envisage a time-bound development strategy, comprising six components.

- Empowering people through self-governance and participatory development
 - Creating development strategies through rural development initiatives
 - Developing sectors with comparative advantages
 - Capacity development of people and institutions
 - Creating hospitable investment climate; and
 - Increased investment from public as well as private sectors.
- Tribal should be encouraged to form Self Help Group (SHG) in the field of fishery, poultry, duckery, piggery, etc. so that they can earn enough for their families.
 - Family Oriented Income Generating schemes (FOIGS), poverty alleviation programme etc. should be designed in such a way that the benefited families can create permanent assets, which in turn generate sufficient monetary income.

A multi-ethnic and economically backward state like Assam needed a committed polity with a matching policy to ensure an equitable socio-economic uplift of all people regardless of the ethnic group they represent. It was absolutely necessary for a society beset by

caste and ethnic conditions with its roots created by an interaction of various historical, social and economic elements and nourished by the colonial rule. An assimilation of the people of different ethnicity into a cohesive mass is a prerequisite for peace stability of the region. But a general lack of sincerity of the policy in this regard even after attainment of independence could be counted as the reason for not achieving it. In fact a polity thriving on disunity of the electorate needs an ethnic divide to sustain its political power, particularly when it has little commitment for any progressive change of the society. A class crystallization and class struggle in a class divided society is an unwanted proposition for any class biased polity exercising their class rule in a disguised manner incomprehensible for any common citizen. An ethnic contradiction invariably diverts the mass from the path of class struggle initiated by the exploited majority by forgetting their ethnic origin and uniting themselves as the deprived class. Naturally when the economic miseries of the major chunk of our population have surpassed limit and some sort of class crystallization in nascent form started to emerge in the society through struggle against macro and micro economic policies pursued by the Governments, and ethnic

divide becomes a necessity for the exploitative system to tackle the situation politically. It could obfuscate a person's insight and thought process and could make him more subjective and emotional'. Presently the complicated ethnic problem of the State has emerged its ugly heads which has become a concern for the people.

In order to resolve the ethnic contradiction of the State, a proper developmental model was a necessity backed by a transparent policy of involving the people in planning and execution process. It could have empowered the people for self governance as well as to dispense with the feeling of being neglected. Moreover the possibilities and constraints of the existing economic system to could have understood by the people had the Constitution given clauses on decentralization of power been adhered to both in the rural and urban sectors. Importantly, by following the provisions of the Constitution in the true sense of the amended clauses, the much hyped political corruption related to development works too could have been arrested through people's surveillance in the monitoring process. In contrast the class biased ruling policy of Assam has been making governance as its exclusive right with support from the leaders of different ethnic

groups, wielding enough influence on the populace of their clan. These selfish leaders who very often than not use such platform with ethnic tinge as the launching pad for self aggrandizement and rise to power rather than doing collective good to the deprived ethnic groups. Consequently an ethnic movement under a new leadership has become a natural phenomenon in Assam in the prevailing political culture.

Concluding Remarks

Assam's tale of woes began with the partition of the country. The problem of transport bottleneck and geographical isolation started in 1947. The man-made calamity was followed by a natural disaster. In 1950, an earthquake almost altering its topology and changing the course of the river Brahmaputra. The earthquake was followed by devastated floods in mid-1950s. Next came the India-China war in 1962. It was a psychological blow to the people of the North-East. The next sever blow came in 1971 when Assam not only had to suffer the war-time tension and the inconveniences of the Bangladesh liberation but also had to give shelter to millions of refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan for more than a year. In 1971, Assam was fragmented once

again and balkanization of the North-East had taken one step further. Assam had to shift its capital in 1974 from Shillong to Guwahati. Even before the administration could settle down in its new environment in a make-shift temporary capital, the Assam agitation began in 1979. The agitation ended in 1985 with the signing of Assam Accord. But the respite was short-lived. The rise of the ULFA in the mid-1980s followed by unrest in the areas dominated by Bodo tribe areas engulfed the State with militancy, insurgency, terrorism and associated killings, extortions, etc.

When Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi took over the reins of the State on 18th May, 2001, there was a hostile Government at the Centre, that of the NDA, totally inimical to the Congress party. It was difficult ensuring smooth flow of Central funds, and the Centre even refused to provide funds for schemes because the State was unable to put in its 25 percent share, notwithstanding the fact that Assam was by then totally bankrupt. Terrorism were calling the shots, people scared of coming out after sunset, roads were totally dilapidated, and business were shifting out due to extortions and abductions. There was total insecurity all over, and people were living in a state of mental

despair where they thought development and normalcy had to wait till peace was brought back. Forget about development projects, such was the State's financial position that even Government employees were not getting their salary and wages for months together.

Pulling Assam out of that morass was a daunting task. Gogoi as Chief Minister has been able to change the people's positive mindset, and Assam is today considered the fastest mover in overall rankings among all States of the country. Gogoi not only persuaded the Centre to release as much funds as possible, but also put in place the Panchayats by holding a long-pending election, thus taking the power of democracy and governance down to the grass roots level. It was under his leadership that a self-help groups' movement silently took off, turning the State's rural economy vibrant.

He believes that India lives in the villages. Hence, his thrust on empowering the rural people and rebuilding the rural infrastructure has worked wonders. While almost every rural road was repaired, over 10,550 km of black-topped roads and 52,000 km of gravel road-length was added to the State apart from 887 concrete bridges since 2001². Connectivity being a powerful developmental mantra that he believes

in, Gogoi has recently got Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to approve and sanction as many as four new bridges across the mighty Brahmaputra River. His sharp focus on education has already added several new institutions to the State, which includes three new medical colleges, and a host of other technical and professional institutions that are opening up new vistas for the younger generation.

Just a single indicator is enough to prove this point; the per capital economy of Assam has more than doubled from Rs. 10,718 in 2001-02 to Rs. 22,081 in 2007-08. The GDP, which stood at a dismal 2.1 percent in 2001, has shot up to eight percent, and is still rising. The State's annual plan, approved by the Planning Commission, has seen a quantum leap from Rs. 1,520 crore in 2000-01 to Rs. 5011 crore in 2008-09³. With a three-fold increase in the budget, Gogoi could bring in a number of prestigious projects from the Centre amounting to a whopping Rs. 26,608 crore⁴.

Gogoi achieved the biggest breakthrough as Chief Minister with his peace initiative to douse the flames of the protracted Bodo movement. Formation of BTC, an Autonomous Council for self-governance under the Sixth Schedule, brought an end to the violent

movement in Bodo heartland. With this, Gogoi had own half battle against militancy. Likewise creation of six Autonomous Councils for Mising, Tiwa, Rabha, Sonowal Kachari, Deori and Thengal Kachari have helped Gogoi in a way to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the ethnic groups and get the backing of the ethnic tribes as well as the Bodo who joined hands with him in forming the Congress-BPF alliance Government in 2006. In his budget speech on 10th July, 2006 of his second term as Chief Minister Gogoi while thanking the people of the State for reposing trust on him once more, said "...This fills my heart with humility and determination to work even harder for all-round development of the State". He has encompassed every segment of the society, be it the ethnic tribes, minorities, tea tribes, STs, SCs and other communities. A number of militant groups have come forward to lay down arms and join the mainstream raising hope of peace.

Several potential sectors have been identified and incentive announced to induce investment. Gogoi Government did not neglect the aspect of FDI, the flow of which can boost its trade and commerce and industrial sectors. The Gogoi-led alliance Government has charted out a new roadmap for economic strategy for the coming years. Its

salient features include stepping up agricultural production through farm mechanization to ensure better remuneration to farmers, construction of a vast network of roads, bridges and national highways, rural development, health and family welfare, has led to various socio-economic and political problems, creation of three medical colleges at the same time, and increasing power generation and development on the industrial front.

So, in conclusion it may be said that present Government of Assam under Tarun Gogoi leadership since 2001 took some bold legislative initiatives and executive decisions for the all-round development of Assam. In view of the plight of the tribals of Assam, various Acts and Amendments has been passed by the Government of Assam for improving the living conditions of the tribal population. These legislative actions are intended to cover agriculture, irrigation, animal husbandry, house sites, co-operative credit, education, health, distribution of essential articles etc. They also aim at protecting the interests of the tribals by providing them with a legal framework, and streamlining their development and raising their standard of living. The Government of Assam had made earnest efforts to provide more

power of self governance to different tribal and ethnic groups within Assam, so as to bring about speedy development in the areas inhabited by the tribal groups.

Notes and references

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