

## I. INTRODUCTION

Today Assam is a seething cauldron of blood and violence. Analysts cite various reasons for this situation. These run from central government's neglect of development in the North-East, alienation of the smaller identity groups from the Assamese-speaking people due to cultural assimilationist strategy, repressive role and corrupt practices of the state machinery and elusive foreign hand, to the leadership hiatus caused by incompetent and immature political leaders. Likewise, solutions offered are many, including widening the ambit of the concept of self-determination to include cultural varieties, declaration of a unilateral ceasefire for the state's militant outfits for a peaceful dialogue, faithful implementation of the Assam Accord as so on. All these contain grains of truth in them and are relevant too. But it is certainly desirable that one analytically distinguishes the historical tradition and contingent factors relating to Assam. Assam movement as a focal point epitomises historical processes and a focus on political economy of Assam draws us to the contingent factors. We feel that such a perspective needs a systematic study of the subject and this in turn requires that we identify our research problem in a sharper way.

**I.1 Statement of the Problem:** Assam has been the only state of Indian Union which has witnessed most frequent changes in territorial boundaries since Indian Independence. Neither did it have any clear sense of political and social boundaries before. Even after the advent of the Ahoms in Assam in 1228 A.D. Assam comprised few scattered kingdoms such as the Ahom Kingdoms etc. comprising Brahmaputra valley and Burma Valley and the frontier hill areas designated differently at different times. It is doubtless whether there was any dominant social identity in this composite Assam. If there was any that was probably destroyed during the Burmese rule in Assam (between 1819-1824). A somewhat clear sense of territorial boundary developed *only* after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 A.D. through which the British wrested Assam from the

Burmese control. Even the Britishers kept the Assam Hills outside the control of Bengal Presidency into which Assam was included, and, from the subsequent Provincial Legislature of Assam. This Hills versus Plains dimension eventually led to the break-up of Assam into the States of North-East. At present, Assam comprises two valleys of Brahmaputra and Barak and Hill areas of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar. Of these Brahmaputra Valley represents the heart of Assam and serves as a connecting link to the North Eastern States. It is also the area wherefrom the Assam movement originated and which is at present the stronghold of several autonomy movements including the militant outfits of ULFA, Bdsf (Bodo Security Force), BLTF (Bodoland Liberation Tigers' Force) etc. The Barak Valley did witness regional demands but now it is somewhat subdued in comparison to those of Brahmaputra Valley. These also involve further claims of territorial adjustments.

The volatile boundaries of Assam as sketched above are interspersed with many sets of conflicts. The hill-plains conflict to which we have referred was accompanied by at least four other sets of conflict in Assam; between the Hindus and the Muslims; between the speakers of two major regional languages, Assamese and Bengali; between Assamese and Plains tribal peoples; and between indigenous populations and migrants including large number of illegal migrants from Bangladesh. The Assam movement was apparently directed against two of these, namely, against the cultural threat posed by the Bengalese and the illegal migrants. The Assam movement which was comparable in magnitude and scale to the national freedom movement led to the conclusion of Assam Accord in 1985. The parties to the Accord expected it to solve the "Foreigners' issue" along with "economic development" and "restoration of normalcy" in the state. Since the Accord, AGP (Asom Gana Parishad) ruled Assam as a regional party for the first time in the history of Assam for about a full term. It was succeeded by the Saikia regime without losing much of its strength and it eventually came back to power in 1996. Apparently, as a preliminary study of political events in Assam shows, the legacy of the

movement belies the expectations and hopes contained in the text of Assam Accord. In fact, the problems addressed by Assam Accord have only aggravated, let alone the other sets of conflicts not directly involved with the Assam Movement.

The Assam Movement has attracted due attention from social scientists for right reasons. Similarly, the regional and ethnic dimensions have been studied in depth. Yet, as the overview of literature will make it clear, the nature of linkage between post-Accord regional politics and regimes on the one hand and the democratic rights of the cultural and linguistic minorities, and increasing tempo of autonomy movements on the other in the Brahmaputra Valley have not been studied in depth. It is not clear how these things are linked together, or if unrelated, on what basis we can understand these post-Accord developments. We propose to study this problem and answer some related questions. In this connection, our study is also expected to make some theoretical contributions to conceptual framework of studying regional movement in the context of Assam. We also propose to use political economy approach in our study of post-Accord developments as a part of a distinctive methodological exercise. Needless to say that our research problem involves critical judgments concerning governmental policies, programmes and institutional innovation which have unquestionable practical import.

**1.2 A brief overview of literature :** Since our Study involves several broad themes such as Assam Movement, Regional Political Parties, Rights of the Minorities and Autonomy movements in Assam, it is hardly possible to prepare a comprehensive review of literature. Yet, there have been significant academic contributions to this area which indicate both research gaps and directions of future research that may be noted here.

The background of Assam Movement can be found in several sociological and historical literature. Of these Gait's work (originally published in 1905) is taken to be most authentic but it covers developments only upto

1926 (in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Moreover, the economic history of the British period was absent there. Some later publications by H.K. Barpujari (1963), S.K. Bhuyan (1965), Amalendu Guha (1977) and (1991), A.C. Bhuyan (1980) tried to cover this gap. But all of them had adopted more historical than political economic approach relevant to contemporary history of Assam. But the more specialised books on Indian political economy such as those by C. Bettelheim (1968), F. Frankel, Rudolf and Rudolf (1987), Achin Vanaik (1990), V.M. Dandekar (1994) etc. have no specific treatment of Assam's political economy. Assam's land question has been studied by N.C. Dutta (1968) and Rooplekha Borgohain (1992) in the pre-Assam Accord period. But they have no reference to the significance of regimes and agrarian transformation. The most systematic study in this respect was by Atul Kohli (1987), but he did not include Assam in his comparative study of different states. Therefore, the need is for a comprehensive work studying the linkage between regimes, economic performance, rural transformation, anti-poverty programmes etc. in the context of Assam. We propose to throw some lights on this area.

Till very recently we did not have systematic study of the Assam Movement. A beginning was made through a compilation by Prof. B.L. Abbi (1984) of the proceeding of an All-India Seminar from 27<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1981 at Chandigarh. Ultimately, Monirul Hussain (1993) produced his Doctoral Dissertation on Assam Movement. He reviewed the nature of the movement with respect to the controversy about the Bengali Conspiracy theory forming the background of Assam movement between Myron Weiner (1978), Hiren Gohain (1980A), Amalendu Guha (1977), Hiren Gohain (1980), D.P. Borooah (1982) and A.K. Barooah (1991). But Monirul Hussain failed to ask the question about the basis of the kind of success that was possible for Assam movement to achieve in the face of a baseless conspiracy theory. The researchers have been able to show that the primary target of the movement were the leftists in Assam who had consolidated their positions before the historic Mongaldoi Parliamentary bi-election of 1979. But what explains the

failure of the leftists to win over the rural small peasants and marginal farmers from the petty-bourgeois leadership of the Assam Movement? Our study is expected to throw some light on this area as well.

Apart from works dealing with the conceptual aspects of regionalism in India such as those by Akhtar Mazed (1984), G. Ram Reddy and B.A.V. Sharma (1979), Bharati Mukherjee (1992) etc. we have very little systematic works on regionalism in Assam. Whatever we have focus generally on regional political parties. Otherwise useful works of L.S. Gassah (1992) and B. Pakhem (1993) has only marginal reference to regional parties in Assam. Of late, some Ph.D. Dissertations have been produced which deal with inter-relationship of different parties in Assam. For instance, R.K. Das (1993) has studied AGP with reference to Electoral politics in Assam, we have not had any major work evaluating the economic performance of post-Accord political regimes in Assam. We not only propose to fill this gap but also to suggest what we think to be a more appropriate conceptual framework for understanding regionalism in Assam than what is available at present.

According to some, Assam has been a land of minorities. But the quest for a homogenous Assam, made explicit to Lord Wavell by Gopinath Bordoloi on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1946 gained momentum and Sylhet was given to Pakistan and Assamese language Act was passed in 1960. The resistance by the minorities also became apparent. The Hill areas eventually separated from Assam, Barak Valley has kept up its resistance till today and in the face of such movements as those against "Bahiragata" and "Bideshi" or the so-called foreigners, the minorities have also organised themselves. The United Minorities Front has been organising the minorities around the now famous IMDT (Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983 and this has proved to be a subject of repeated demands for it's scrapping by AASU (All Assam Student Union) and other related organisations. While Misra (1985) anticipated many of the problems of minorities in the wake of Assam Accord we have not had any comprehensive study on United Minorities Front so far comparable to the one

made by M.L. Kar on Muslim Politics in Assam (1990) and the Ph.D. Dissertation produced by Rudraman Thapa (1995) on Nepali Politics in Assam. Hence, we propose to deal with problems of the minorities with special reference to the role of UMF in some detail.

The literature on autonomy movements in Assam is not always well focused. Most of the works assumed the form of running commentaries on different related issues like foreigners' problem, insurgency, migration etc. under the general theme of ethnicity and politics in Assam. These include works by Paul Brass (1991 and 1992), T.K. Oommen (1990), Ayesha Jalal (1995), B.G. Verghese (1996) etc. P.S. Datta made available several documents concerning the autonomy movements in Assam (1990 and 1993). Most of the major works are in the area of tribal studies such as those by V. Elwin (1964), W. Rodzinsky (1984), Nari Rustomji (1973) etc. These, however, are somewhat dated and do not include materials on the recent controversies regarding demarcation of boundaries for tribal autonomous councils and tribal development programmes undertaken by the Assam Government since 1985. The chief literary sources about autonomy movements, however, are still various unpublished documents and journalistic writings. Moreover, as we have noted earlier one has to go beyond the journalistic writings in understanding the roots of insurgency (P.S. Datta : 1997) and for this the regional political economy in the post-Accord Assam must be studied..

### 1.3 Research Questions or Hypotheses:

We intend to answer the following Research Questions on the basis of some hypotheses discussed hereunder:

1. If the Assam Movement, as alleged by the Leftists, was basically chauvinistic and hence successful in marginalising the Left in the politics of the Brahmaputra Valley why did chauvinism get much acceptance ?

The question may be asked in a different way. If the Post-Accord Regimes did continue to represent narrow sectional interests and follow chauvinistic policies why the Left has failed to regain its lost ground in the politics of the Brahmaputra Valley ?

We propose to test the following hypotheses on the basis of data (to be specified later) with respect to the above question.

- (a) The Left was marginalised easily because of its organisational weakness in the rural areas of the Brahmaputra Valley.
  - (b) Socio-cultural proximity of the rural land owning class and small-marginal peasants made the leadership of the former acceptable to the latter.
2. Why have the Minority and the Autonomy Movements in the Brahmaputra Valley acquired momentum and displayed more militancy in the Post-AGP period ?

For answering the question following hypotheses would be tested.

- (a) The AGP in representing the interest of the regional and petty-bourgeois sections and rural land owning interests failed to reduce social inequality and to attack rural poverty.
- (b) The chauvinistic policies of AGP continued unabated in the Post-Accord period and alienated the minorities and tribal population.
- (c) The Saikia regime in safeguarding the interests of the national and regional bourgeois was engaged in a policy of divide and rule.
- (d) Both AGP and Saikia Regimes worked in a partisan manner without commitment to general welfare.

#### 1.4 The Conceptual Framework and Methodology:

The existing conceptual framework for Studying Assam Politics are generally derived from the conceptual frameworks of studying regionalism in India. But these seem to be inadequate for various reasons. The most popular theory of relative deprivation hardly explains the issue of citizenship. The general Marxist- framework on the Nationality Question which attributes a centrality to the role of the middle class has to be modified in view of the historical specificity of the stages of social development in Assam. Due to historic reasons Assamese middle class was denied entry to the metropolitan bourgeoisie and the control of State Government represented for them an avenue of upward mobility. The Assamese ruling class with a strong rural connection object to the outsiders but not to the outside capital. They are more concerned with the middle class issues and demands, in addition to protecting the interests of the Asamiya tea-planters, press-owners, transport operators, contractors, rural gentry and absentee land lords. Since the state funding represents the major source of economic activity in an underdeveloped regional economy the Assamese ruling class has always been concerned to create social homogeneity the effect of which is minoritization of those social groups which either oppose this class or on whom this class subsists.

For testing the hypotheses we have decided to avoid the extreme of ideographic and no-mothetic methods. While the former with its descriptive style may often grasp the richness of complex social realities, the judgements may however become impressionistic. The advantages of no-mothetic methods are clarity, specificity and accuracy, but in social science researches such methods frequently involve surveys, together with follow-up procedures like sampling, scaling and various techniques of data processing. But they can hardly be undertaken without favourable social circumstances. In Assam, these are most unfavourable. So we have decided to adopt a combination of descriptive analysis and use of select aggregate data on a purposive basis interviews. Below we elaborate a little on the proposed methodological steps.

1. Out of 23 districts in Assam at present 18 are located in the Brahmaputra Valley. On the average each district comprises 5 to 7 Assembly Constituencies approximately. We propose to select, on the basis of electoral trends, four districts, each representing respectively the strongholds of Tribal Autonomy movements, minority movements, the AGP and the Congress (I).
2. We also propose to identify one sub-district unit in terms of electoral trends on the basis of the principle noted above.
3. Taking the All-Assam average in 1971 Census as the base we would calculate the developmental stage of each sub-district unit with reference to the following indices:
  - a) Infrastructural facilities (To be calculated as per the norms adopted by the CMIE).
  - b) Percentage of people engaged in Agriculture.
  - c) Literacy Rate.

On the basis we propose to calculate the relative rate of economic development of these areas and show the significance, if any, for their political characters across two successive regimes preceding and succeeding the Assam Accord.

We also propose to evaluate the general economic performance of the two post-Accord regimes with respect to the All-India average in terms of the following economic criteria :

- (i) Relative Infrastructural Development Index
- (ii) Operational Holding by major size class

- (iii) Land Utilisation
- (iv) Area of Production and Yield of Food grains
- (v) Fertilizer Consumption
- (vi) Power Consumption
- (vii) Public Finance (Revenue and Capital)
- (viii) Per-Capita State Government Expenditure
- (ix) Medical Facilities
- (x) Education
- (xi) Rate of Poverty
- (xii) Index of Industrial Production
- (xiii) Ratio of Plan and Non-Plan Expenditure as per budgetary estimates.

It is therefore clear that we are interested not only in the political performance and social character but also in the explication of the redistributive rate of varying regimes within the context of societal contexts. In addition to economic data our study was also concerned with broad historical details to locate the Assam movement in proper historical perspective. We have already explained out neither case study method nor survey method could be practicable options in contemporary Assam. Hence our dependence on aggregate data. This sets an obvious limit to our study. However in our eclectic research method, we used intensive interviews with relevant members of both state and civil society, bureaucrats, political leaders, intellectuals, common citizens to overcome that limit to some extent .

### 1.5 Plan of Work and Chapterisation Scheme:

The focal area of our research is the political developments of the Brahmaputra Valley after the Assam Accord (1985) with particular references to minority politics and autonomy movements. Our plan was to examine these in the larger historical background of this region. Hence the Study depended on a huge historical material and their critical assimilation. Apart from this the focus has been broadened by the use of aggregate data concerning economic development of this region as well as a detailed study of relevant manifestoes, pamphlets and supplemented by personal interviews with political leaders and activists

In terms of the above the thesis has been divided into seven chapters. Chapter I introduces the problem formulates the research questions and hypothesis. Chapter II brings together in a selective way the relevant historical materials from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Chapter III takes up the nature and impact of the Assam Movement as the immediate general background of the post-Accord politics and its typical issues. Chapter IV places the autonomy movements after the Assam Accord in the Brahmaputra Valley in the background of autonomy movements in Assam in general and the Assam Accord in particular. Chapter V takes up UMF for an elaborate discussion as the first systematic effort to study the minority politics revolving round the issue of citizenship and deportation of illegal migrants. Chapter VI highlights the political-economic scenario of two successive regimes after the Assam Accord in an attempt to understand the contingent factors associated with the general fall out of The Assam Accord on the politics of the Brahmaputra Valley.

Chapter VII provides summery and conclusion by way of linking the conceptual framework, research questions, hypotheses and chapter-wise discussions. We have provided a select Bibliography in place of a comprehensive Bibliography for two reasons. First, there has been a barrage of literature on the politics of the North East which are relevant in some way to our focal theme. Had we included them it

would have needed another volume. Second, thanks to ICSSR, North Eastern Regional Centre, we have a prepared Bibliography upto 1992. So we could selectively emphasize the post-1992 publications in our Select Bibliography. In addition we have provided a list of Tables, Graphs and included some materials not ordinarily available in four appendices. We have used a running style of references in the body of the text which enables a reader to locate the detailed reference in the Bibliography. Moreover, certain explanatory notes have been added at the end of some chapters where necessary..