

Assam Forum Conference 2015

London School of Economics

5th September 2015

Address by Chairman Dr. Jitendralal Borkakoti

Ladies and gentlemen!

Welcome you to the 4th Assam Forum Conference. Thank you for taking the trouble to come here. I extend a special welcome to Dr. Ivan Weir from Newcastle University, Mr. Dan Range from Coventry University, Dr. Ritu kateky from Durham University, Dr. Suman Singh and Dr. Muraree Meena, both from Banaras Hindu University. I see several new persons attending this conference, and I am very encouraged by this. I specifically welcome Mr. Dhruba Barthakur who is one of the top Executives of the Facebook.

Let me first announce a message from Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal, Minister of State with independent Charge, in the Modi Government. Let me read out his message (which appears here in the last page). Also, I should also mention that Mr. Wahid Saleh from the Netherlands, and Dr. Salim Ali from Germany have sent their best wishes for the conference.

After the 2014 conference, executive summary of the conference discussions were submitted to the Chief Minister of Assam with copies to the Chief Secretary of the Government of Assam. Our conference had television exposure in Assam. Our Conference discussions have drawn attention to the flood and erosion problems of Assam and also revealed inaction and gross inefficiency of the Government of Assam, and sheer incompetence of the Brahmaputra Board, in this regard.

This is the 4th conference organized by Assam Forum GB. Let us take a look at some of the things we said during the last 3 years, and what is being discussed today in the political circles of Assam.

Regarding the Bangladeshi issue and the Assam Accord, we said the following in our 2013 Conference. If we are to succeed in deporting 2 to 3 million illegal migrants to Bangladesh, we must have an international treaty between India and Bangladesh. Not only that, we met up with the High Commissioner of Bangladesh in London, and established the fact that the Government of India had never raised the Bangladeshi issue with the Government of Bangladesh.

Now, only about six months back, and about 30 years after the Assam Accord was signed, the MLA's of the Assam Assembly woke up to demand that the Government of India approach the Bangladeshi Government in the matter of deportation. Representatives of AASU (All Assam Students Union) went to New Delhi only three weeks back to demand the same. It seems we were ahead in this game, shall we say, this intellectual game, because of our clear and logical thinking.

We advocated a policy of prevention and assimilation. Regarding prevention of Bangladeshi migrants entering Assam, please note that the border fencing has not yet been completed after 30 years; and the riverine route is free for Bangladeshis to come and go as they like. Assam-Bangladesh border is 267 kilometres long, and out of this, 44 kilometres is riverine border. Effective border patrols in fast boats are not taking place, as suggested by us. Regarding the matter of detecting and deporting illegal migrants, we said that a lot more resources are required. The Government actually increased the number Tribunals; but the tragedy is that the convicted illegal migrants simply disappear. The whole process has simply been a farcical spectacle.

In our 2014 conference we discussed the perennial flood problems of Assam. It was pointed out then that China failed to canalize the Howangho river by dredging, and finally constructed 11 dams on the river to control floods. Back in March 2015, the Government of Assam mooted to review a dead proposal of dredging the Brahmaputra, and to request the Central Government in this regard. It simply will not work as the Brahmaputra is one of the biggest carriers of sediments in the world. We understand that the strategy of the Water Resources.

Ministry in New Delhi is to try to control Brahmaputra flood by building a series of dams in Arunachal Pradesh. And preliminary work is going ahead.

Furthermore, our conference exposed the extremely poor governance in the matter of flood control. Professor Arup Sarma from IIT Guwahati expressed his frustration, and illustrated the fundamental problem of implementation of projects by citing an actual example. A thorough study of the Guwahati flash flood was carried out by the IIT in 1999 and identified where the water flows come from; and accordingly technical solutions were recommended. But because of the lack of a central authority to implement the various construction works, the various departments were willing to do only the bit that is in their administrative purview. There was, thus, administrative chaos without any department taking the lead; and the plans were ultimately not implemented. What has happened to the money allocated for that purpose? The project failed. The flash flood problems in Guwahati are continuing. And what have the people of Guwahati done to revive this project? Social apathy sadly helps perpetuate such gross inefficiency!

Regarding the erosion problem in Majuli, we exposed the following.

The Brahmaputra Board proposed a Master Plan in 1996 and, only after 7 years in 2003, came up with a detailed plan, involving Rs.96.56 crore, to be completed in three phases by 2006-07. The Board miserably failed to implement the projects of the Plan. The erosion of Majuli is still going on unabated, and nobody has owned up for this utter failure.

We have exposed another issue. Majuli is likely to have significant benefits if the island gets the Unesco World Heritage status. In fact, this might save the river island. For the third time in 2012, the World Heritage Committee rejected the application from the Government of India on the grounds that all necessary documents were not complete as per the latest operational Guidelines. Tragically, no nomination dossier was submitted when the 38th session of the World Heritage Committee was held in Doha in 2014. Because of pathetically poor governance, no nomination dossier was prepared. The 2012 dossier was prepared by the Archaeological Survey of India, but was thereafter decided that the revised dossier would be prepared by the Government of Assam, and accordingly the State Government was requested. The Assam Government failed to produce the required dossier for 2014. Now the question is: has any action been taken to submit the dossiers for 2016? We do not hear the people of Assam making any noise about this.

However, we have taken up all these issues in our Memorandum to the Prime Minister of India. AFGB Member, Mr. Chiranjit Sonowal and I met the Water Resources Minister, Ms. Uma Bharti, the Additional Secretary of the WATER Resources Ministry, Dr. Amarjit Singh, and discussed the flood problems. We are lobbying to get the failed Majuli project to be revived. My impression is that Ms. Uma Bharti is a very sincere person and wants to protect Majuli. With the replacement of Brahmaputra Board with significantly empowered NEBRRA (that is, North East River Rejuvenation Authority), we hope that things will change very rapidly.

We could not meet Prime Minister Modi, but Mr. Ajit Doval, the National Security Adviser to the Government of India, accepted the memorandum on Mr. Modi's behalf. We have specifically requested Modi to order the relevant Department to produce the dossier for Majuli's heritage status. I shall not go through the contents of the Memorandum, which is available in our Website (www.assmafourmgb.org.uk).

Today we are going to discuss three burning issues in Assam. The first topic is on identity crisis: who is an Assamese? This has serious implications politically and socially. The implementation of Clause 6 of the Assam Accord requires a clear definition of the identity of the Assamese people. The second topic is on gender issues in Assam. The Assamese society has changed radically during the last 30 or 40 years. When I was in Assam, we never heard of dowry murder, or witch hunting, or abduction of girls to North India. All these things are happening today. What can be done to eradicate such criminal social behaviour? The third topic is on good governance and corruption. Sadly, corruption has been institutionalised in Assam, as in many other States in India. But Assam has become the worst corrupt State in India. Let us see, if we can come up with some policy measures today.

Fundamentally, the role of AFGB is to highlight the problems of Assam, galvanize the people both here and in Assam to realise the seriousness of the problems and to think, and to find solutions to the problems if we can. This is what we shall endeavour to do – battling for Assam, and we hit a six with the Memorandum to Prime Minister Modi.

Joi Ai Axom.

Thank you.