

Memorandum

To the Prime Minister of India

On the Economic and Social Problems of Assam

The Right Honourable Shri Narendra Modi, MP

Prime Minister of India

PMO South Block, Raisina Hill, New Delhi – 110011.

12 February 2015

Honourable Prime Minister,

Your dazzling leadership as Prime Minister during the last eight months have impressed the global leaders. The initiatives you have taken, both in India and abroad, will build the foundation for India to emerge as a strong nation in the 21st century. Because of our confidence in your government's ability to get things done, with rising hopes and eager expectation, we would like to draw your kind attention to a few perennial problems of Assam.

Many Assamese people who live outside India consider that Assam is now at historical crossroads, and we take this opportunity to raise our concerns and to implore you to take appropriate actions so that Assam could be saved from sliding remorselessly downhill to multidimensional forms of extreme poverty and chaos. We are seriously concerned about economic growth and development, flood & erosion problems, poor governance, corruption, insurgency and law & order situation, demographic invasion & the Assam Accord, peace negotiations with the ULFA, and balkanization.

Economic Growth and Development:

Assam is the economic hub of the North East region, accounting for about 69% of the regional population and about 65% of the regional output. The whole of North East is poor as compared to the rest of India, and Assam and Manipur are the poorest states, going neck in neck in terms of real per capita income. Mizoram, Tripura and Sikkim have done comparatively well. If we consider the state per capita income (PCI) as a percentage of India's PCI (2010-11 figures), it is revealed that Arunachal Pradesh has a score of 94%, Sikkim 89%, Meghalaya 88%, Mizoram 84%, Tripura 70%, Assam 55% and Manipur 54%. A similar picture also emerges from the following figures if we compare the NE states with some of the better off states of India in terms of PCI (2012-13 figures in current prices): Haryana (Rs.122,660), Maharashtra (Rs.107,670), Tamil Nadu (Rs.98,550), West Bengal (Rs.62,831), Meghalaya

(Rs.60,156), Nagaland (Rs.59,535), Tripura (Rs.55,004), Assam (Rs.42,013), Manipur (Rs.36,290).

Per capita income is a fairly good measure that reveals the strength of an economy. In 1950, the per capita income of undivided Greater Assam was 4% higher than that of India; but in 2010-11 truncated Assam's per capita income is only 55% of India's per capita income, that is, 45% lower than that of India. If we compare Assam with some economically advanced states of India, then the latest figures (2013-2014) reveal that Assam's PCI is only 35% of Haryana's PCI and 41% of Maharashtra's PCI. There is no doubt that Assam, despite her vast natural resources, has not performed well economically during the last 60 years or so. We reason that this is because of severe economic and social constraints that have impeded faster economic growth and development. Some important economic constraints are: poor provision of infrastructure including connectivity and power supply, lack of private industrial investment, failed public sector undertakings, annual scourge of flood and erosion, and low productivity in agriculture. Significant social and political constraints include poor governance, large-scale corruption, insurgency, and deteriorating law & order situation. All these constraints have had debilitating effects on the economy, and have conspired to create a serious problem of unemployment which is the most important economic problem in Assam today, because it involves mental agony and economic deprivation. Unemployment is a vital cause of poverty and social unrest in Assam.

The pattern of economic growth in Assam is not pro-poor primarily because agriculture contributes only 34% to the State GDP while almost 70% of the population live in the rural areas, while the service sector contributes 49% that benefits mainly the middle class urban population. Industry contributes only 17% such that the low level of industrial investment leads to urban unemployment of educated people and semi-skilled workers. The Rangarajan Committee, using a relatively advanced methodology, has estimated Rs.1420 per capita per month as the Urban and Rs.1007 as Rural Poverty Lines in Assam. On that basis, 42% of the rural and 41% of the urban population are found to be poor, yielding a figure of 13 million (out of the current total population of 32 million) poor people in Assam. However, if one takes the ADB Poverty Line (\$1.51 per head per day) or the WB Poverty Line (\$1.25 per head per day), and makes a straight forward calculation, it will perhaps reveal that people living in poverty in Assam exceeds 60%.

It may be noted that economic growth does not necessarily lead to economic development the former being defined in terms of the rate of growth of real GDP and the latter in terms of availability of adequate provisions to satisfy the basic economic needs. These basic provisions include food and shelter, access to primary education and health care, drinking water, and sanitation. Economic growth is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for economic development. Deliberate and targeted actions are required to convert economic growth to economic development. Failure to deliver this conversion, because of poor governance in Assam, is a cause for serious concern. Assam's HDI indices are low, and compares well only with some poor African countries.

Flood & Erosion Problems:

The people of Assam, specifically the rural poor, have been suffering from the annual scourge of extensive flood for more than 50 years. When flood comes, the Government of Assam takes up short-term fire-fighting measures to ameliorate the situation. It is high time that we consider long-term solutions for a permanent resolution of this problem. We are of the opinion that pouring money into the repair of the old embankments is a waste of resources, and it will not solve the flood problem in Assam. The Central government should declare Assam's perennial flood problem as a national problem, and take charge to find a permanent solution. On this, we support the resolution passed unanimously by the Assam State Assembly in July 2012. The UPA Government failed to implement the proposed North East Water Authority (NEWRA) because of reported objections from Arunachal Pradesh. We whole heartedly support the initiative taken by the NDA Government to establish the North East and Brahmaputra River Rejuvenation Authority (NEBRRRA) empowered to take a holistic approach to the flood and erosion problems of the North East. NEBRRRA must find long-term solutions to this perennial problem by investing in serious scientific studies and by seeking advice from both the Indian scientists and the internationally reputed experts in flood control.

The holistic approach to the flood problems must also address the closely related problem of erosion. The current annual loss of land in Assam due to erosion is estimated to be 80 km². The river island Majuli is threatened by rapid erosion which has become an international concern. At the heart of the problem is the fact that the riverbed of the Brahmaputra, which is the second greatest sediment carrier after the Yellow River in China, has risen by several feet during the last 65 years (since the 1950 earthquake). Therefore, it appears to us that only a long-term (15-year) plan with a holistic approach to the flood and erosion problems in Assam is the only solution. Such a plan will require a vast amount of resources, perhaps in the region of Rs.25,000 crores over 15 years, and this fund should come from the Central Government.

In a recent conference organised by the Assam Forum of Great Britain in London, Professor Arup Sarma from IIT Guwahati has advocated a holistic approach. Assam suffers from heavy monsoonal flow of water through the river system, and on the other hand, due to large temporal variation of the available water in the Brahmaputra basin, utilisable water is only about 3 to 4 percent of its available water. A holistic approach is thus necessary to find sustainable solutions to the flood and erosion problems, and also to integrate water resources to economic development. The holistic approach has three main project components. The first is an assessment of seasonal or monthly water demand including water for power generation and irrigation. Second, in order to meet the assumed demand, the supply or flow of water must be augmented in space and time, so that the spatiotemporal variation of the available water is reduced by appropriate use of reservoir. Optimal operating policies will increase utilizable water. Third, both structural and non-structural measures are required to solve the flood and erosion problems. Ecological Management Practices should be adopted on the basis of simulation carried out by using a mathematical optimizing model of the entire Brahmaputra basin, taking into consideration the piedmont zones. This will indicate the likely flow and sediment movement. To find

the optimal flood control measures and to protect the river banks, hydrodynamic models have to be linked to the optimization model. Professors at the IIT, Guwahati, have developed a model called the BRAHMA model (being the acronym, of Braided River Aid Hydro-Morphological Analyzer) that uses a Genetic Algorithm (GA) based optimization procedure. They have used this model to develop a linked-simulation optimization model to determine measures for optimal protection. We expect NEBRRRA to use such scientific approach to determine the exact course of actions, and to implement the same within a time-bound plan.

Honourable Prime Minister, we also would like to apprise you of the important issue of China building dams in the Yarlung Tsangpo (the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra). The first dam, located in Lokha prefecture, will be completed in 2015. Four more dams are planned, and they are “run of the river” hydroelectric projects; and these are not expected to adversely affect the flow of water to the North East of India. However, China is also planning to build several other dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo; and the biggest ever (capacity 40,000mw) is to be built on the great bend of the Brahmaputra. But this planned dam is not a “run of the river” project, and it is likely to lead to some serious issues for Assam. China plans to divert 57 billion cubic meters of water per year from the Yarlung Tsangpo to the river Tao. This diversion will involve constructing 37 dams and 39 tunnel sections with a total length of 1455 kilometres. It is highly probable, as pointed out by Dr. Rajib Bhattacharjya from IIT Guwahati, that there will be serious downstream problems in the North East. India has a MOU with China on sharing hydrological data of the river Brahmaputra during the monsoon season; but the lean period upstream flow data are not available. Effective solutions to the problems of flood and erosion in Assam must take into account such anthropogenic developments at the upstream of Brahmaputra. We would be grateful if you would raise this issue with the Chinese government.

One life-and-death question relates to our famous river island Majuli. Because of relentless erosion over the decades, Majuli is reduced from 1256 km² in 1891 to 925 km² in 1971, and then to 577 km² in 1998. This river island now measures about 421 km² with the serious implication that it will be completely annihilated by the mighty Brahmaputra in about four to five decades, if that trend of destruction continues. Majuli is the largest fluvial island only in India and not in the world. But the importance of Majuli in terms of cultural heritage cannot be underestimated; and urgent steps must be taken to save Majuli from total destruction. The Brahmaputra Board proposed a Master Plan in 1996 and, only in 2003 after 7 years, 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. This is a sad example of poor governance. The erosion of Majuli is still going on unabated.

May we, in this context, take this opportunity to raise an important but neglected matter. Majuli will have significant benefits if the island gets the UNESCO World Heritage status. In fact, this probably will 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 administrative apathy and irresponsibility, 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. We would like to request you to order the relevant Department of your Government to prepare the dossier faultlessly and submit the same on time for the next session of the World Heritage Committee.

Lastly, on the flood problems, we would like to draw your attention to the flash floods in Guwahati, the gateway to the North East. The people of Guwahati have been suffering for the last 15 to 20 years from flash flood; and recently the situation has deteriorated. Again the Government of Assam has not been able to cope with the problem. 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. NEBRRRA should also take charge and adopt a holistic approach in to solve this long-term problem.

Poor Governance:

Good governance will show how efficiently the state departments or institutions are run, how efficiently the public services like education and healthcare are delivered, to what extent the Police succeed in maintaining the law and order, and how efficiently the planned social and economic projects are completed. Good governance is a necessary condition for rapid economic and social development. The Commission for Africa, established by the Blair Government, produced a Report on the problems of Africa. They point out that good governance has three important components, namely, capacity building, accountability and transparency. One of the prime reasons of why Assam has been lagging behind the rest of India is poor governance and lack of transparency which is a euphemism for corruption.

Honourable Prime Minister, may we raise a few examples of poor governance in Assam. Central funds for projects under Five Year Plans could not be utilised, and the unutilised funds have been returned to the Centre. During the period from 2001-02 fiscal year to 2012-13, the total Plan allocation was Rs.56,548 crore out of which Rs.13,093 crore had remained unutilised (noting that 1 crore is 10 million). That is, 23% of the resources were not used. That unused resources amount to £1.3 billion pound sterling, and that is a huge sum of money. The people of Assam, solely because of poor governance, have missed out on potential economic benefits which otherwise would have accrued to them. Fundamentally, the lack of capacity building is responsible for this failure to utilise the Central funds. The Government of Assam has the dubious distinction of achieving the lowest utilisation rate in India.

The CAG Reports have always been very critical. In the latest report, CAG detects glaring anomalies in implementation of various schemes by the State Irrigation Department. A quote from their report will give you a good idea of what has been going on.

“Not a single major/medium project was completed within the stipulated period. The projects remained incomplete for 33 to 38 years since inception of the

schemes/projects. Without completing the ongoing schemes, minor irrigation schemes (MIS) were taken up without financial sanction from the Ministry of Water Resources of the Government of India”.

Then the report goes on to state that planning was an integral part of programmed implementation, but the Irrigation Department had not prepared any perspective plan. Moreover, no annual plan for implementation of Accelerated Irrigation Benefit Programme (AIBP) has been produced. The last date was June 2013. This is just an example, but it is symptomatic of all the government departments in Assam.

Furthermore, inability to deliver completion of projects is related to corruption too. This can be illustrated by the incompetent delivery of the NREGA programme. NREGA is meant for the poorest of the poor. Rural beneficiaries get Rs.100 a day and employment is guaranteed for 100 days. Assam failed to ensure 100 days of rural employment. Out of 30 lakhs of job card holders, only 28% found jobs in 2009-10. Because of lack of transparency on the part of the State Government, NREGA officials allegedly have made NREGA a major source of corruption. Many government officials are alleged to have got job cards; and the money meant for the poorest of the poor has gone to the well-off people.

Large-scale Corruption:

Honourable Prime Minister, if one reads the CAG reports on Assam, one's eyes are filled with tears. CAG finds “serious financial irregularities” including funds being released in excess of budgetary provisions. The Government of Assam regularly fails to submit completion certificates. Some completion certificates have not been submitted for over five years.

There have been scam after scam running into thousands of crores of rupees, but nobody seems to get caught or punished, and eventually and tragically, everything gets dumped into the dustbin of history, and the heartless criminals live happily ever after. The most serious type of corruption arises from the unholy nexus of politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. The national funds meant for development and poverty alleviation have been regularly, methodically and blatantly looted by the greedy unpatriotic thugs.

One common *modus operandi* is the use of false LOC, as in the alleged scam involving supply to hospitals and veterinary department, and also in the scam involving salary for fictitious or ghost employees, as alleged in the case of Assam Police Battalion based at Kahilipara. There are allegedly ghost school teachers, etc. There is wide-spread corruption in the PDS system with an alleged diversion of 25% of the PDS commodities. The corrupt officials reportedly take the money meant for the poorest of the poor in the society.

The CBI investigations seem to drag on for years. It is thus necessary to establish an elite unit of CBI to expedite investigations; and the criminals should be tried in Special Courts for quick judgements.

Under your strong leadership, we must fight against such moral degradation in our society. Corruption has been institutionalised. This wide-spread cancer of corrup-

tion has to be taken out of the body politic. We have to demolish kleptocracy within the structure of democracy. With firm determination and strong leadership, this could be done. In Assam, with your help, Honourable Prime Minister, we must begin a process of fast track trials, convictions and imprisonment; and we are hoping that the NDA Government will find effective ways to start the process of cleaning up Assam.

Insurgency and Law and Order:

The social environment created by the terrorist activities has led to serious deterioration of the general law and order situation in Assam during the last twenty-five years. The acts of violence including extortion, kidnapping and making explosive devices are carried out by some misguided but determined terrorists. There are reportedly 38 terrorist groups (including 11 Muslim terrorist groups) in Assam, and about 12 groups are said to be active. The prolific proliferation of terrorist groups in Assam within a short period of twenty-five years is astonishing by any historical standards.

Terrorism in Assam has had a significant negative impact on growth and development in Assam. Empirical studies have provided strong evidence that law and order is an important determinant of economic growth. Insurgency has a negative impact on the levels of private investment, and also on the flow of investment from outside. Investors find themselves facing extortion demands from the insurgents. Second, government cannot concentrate on economic development, as a lot of manpower and resources are used to fight terrorists. As a consequence, the developmental projects get neglected. Third, funds earmarked for development are often looted and transferred to the coffers of the militants.

In fact, the general law and order situation in Assam has deteriorated to the lowest level today since independence with robbery, kidnapping, murder and rape cases being rife. Human trafficking, particularly young girls from poor rural families, has become a big problem. There are also murder cases involving witch-hunting and dowry payments. A quarter of a century back, such cases were unheard of..

Reportedly, 30% of the Police force is busy protecting the VIPs and their families. Assam Police, as we understand, needs to be bolstered by about 15,000 so that man power is available to tackle the law and order problems.

Demographic Invasion and the Assam Accord:

The six-year Assam Movement led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) had overwhelming support of the people of Assam. ASSU wanted a resolution of the foreigners' problem – a euphemism for large-scale illegal migration from Bangladesh - within the provisions of the Indian Constitution. After much violence and bloodshed, AASU and AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) decided to negotiate with the Government of India, and finally, after 27 rounds of talks, under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi, the Assam Accord was signed on 15th August 1985. People's hope for a solution and expectation for peace were raised.

Assam Accord is fundamentally a Memorandum of Settlement. It was not discussed and passed by the Parliament; and this being so, it does not seem to carry much constitutional weight. But the Accord contained formidable proposals and served Assam well as it brought temporary peace at least in one front. On the Bangladeshi issue, the main conclusion is the following: subject to “constitutional and legal provisions, international agreements, national commitments and humanitarian considerations”, foreigners who came to Assam after 25th March 1971 will be detected, deleted from the electoral roll and expelled in accordance with law. To stop further infiltration, the border will be made more secure with barbed wire fencing, patrols by security forces on land and riverine routes will be intensified, and adequate number of check posts will be set up. A road along the international border will be constructed to facilitate patrolling. Furthermore, relevant laws for prevention of encroachment of Government lands and lands in tribal belts and blocks will be strictly enforced, and encroachers will be evicted.

The detection-deletion-deportation process as envisaged in the Accord does appear to be only an aspiration rather than a firm policy of action in view of the fact that nobody knew how many illegal Bangladeshis were in Assam at that point; and therefore the scale of the administrative and judiciary resources required to implement that policy were hardly considered. In addition, not a moment’s thought was given to whether the detect-delete-deport policy was implementable without some form of international treaty with Bangladesh. On the other hand, it was a serious error of judgement not to include representatives from the tribal communities, the Adivasis and the Assamese Muslims. Their non-participation in the process of negotiations weakened the Accord’s political relevance and legitimacy. These groups of people largely distanced themselves from the Accord over time.

There is now the number game played by various authors as reliable estimates of the number of illegal Bangladeshis migrating to Assam from the seventies are not available. There have been various estimates; but taking the serious studies into consideration, one can make a guesstimate that the accurate figure is likely to be between 2 and 3 million between 1971 and 2011.

The biggest hurdle in deporting illegal immigrants was the Illegal Migrant (Determination by Tribunals) Act 1983 (IMDT Act) which was passed by the Congress Government. The transparent flaw of the Act was that the onus of furnishing proof against a suspected foreigner rests on the complainant and not on the accused. In 2005, after 22 years, the Supreme Court of India struck down the IMDT Act as a result of the legal action initiated by the Honourable Minister Shri Sarbananda Sonowal. But the main objective of detection, deletion and deportation has failed miserably, and in our opinion, for reasons which are imbedded in the Accord, specifically that the Accord did not spell out a robust institutional structure with commensurate resources to handle a complex problem. In addition, there is no international treaty with the Bangladeshi Government on an international procedure that will allow India to send back a large number of illegal Bangladeshi migrants from Assam.

However, over the last 30 years, circumstances have changed. The President of India in his Independence Day message to the nation in 2012 suggested that we should revisit the Assam Accord, and adapt it “to present conditions in the spirit of justice and national interest”. The sacrifice of the Assamese people during the

Assam Movement now appears to have been in vain. The Assam Accord is now outdated as events have overtaken it. We have no expectation that detection and deportation will take place, but detection and deletion may still take place as the process has started after 30 years.

Even if we had a treaty with Bangladesh, detection and deportation of millions of people, by following elaborate legal procedures, are simply not feasible. This explains what has happened during the last 30 years. Furthermore, Bangladeshis who have lived in Assam, say, from 1971, have children who are now adults. They are born and brought up in Assam, and these children are Indian citizens. Eviction of such families, although they entered Assam after 1971, will fall foul of human rights. More than quarter of a century has passed, and as time passes, it becomes relatively more difficult to follow the policy enshrined in the Accord. The strategy should now be switched to prevention of further infiltration and assimilation of the settled Bangladeshis. Also, empirical evidence reveals that the flow from Bangladesh has somewhat slowed down.

Our simple but radical solution is based on prevention and assimilation. First, declare amnesty to all Bangladeshi immigrants who have lived in Assam for the last 30 years or more and/or who own land with *patta*. This is the de facto situation although not de jure. This group will gain Indian citizenship. Second, issue work permit to those who have lived in Assam for less than 30 years and/or who do not own land. This group will not have voting rights as they will be treated as foreigners. The problem then transforms into finding answers about how to accommodate and assimilate the vast number of Bangladeshis who are already in Assam.

Illegal occupation of land is the most important issue, particularly, the occupation of land in the tribal belts and blocks. There is significant evidence that the Bangladeshis migrate to Assam to find land; and therefore clashes in the rural areas are inevitable; and this is the reason why there are clusters of Bangladeshis. The long-term policy should be to disperse the Bangladeshis to all parts of the North East, and some government land has to be allotted to them for settlement. Also, there should be attempts to wean them out of the land intensive activities to other labour intensive activities. Secondly, we should seek help from the indigenous Muslim communities to work with the Bangladeshi Muslims for peace and harmony. If the migrants feel threatened, as they are now, the Jihadi forces will find a natural ally for support, as they seem to have now. Reportedly, Jihadi terrorists in Assam have become a significant threat.

Honourable Prime Minister, Assam needs your help and guidance for a permanent solution to this long standing vexed problem.

Peace Negotiations:

The peace negotiations that have been going on between the “surrendered” factions of the terrorist groups and the Government of India, in our humble opinion, should be handled in a time-bound manner. There is a distinct possibility that the current negotiations may also come to a stalemate as in the case of the NSCN(I-M) group from Nagaland who have been negotiating since 1997. ULFA entered into negotiations in 2011, and people of Assam have been waiting to hear the final outcome of these negotiations. According to the media reports, the difficulty in extraditing ULFA’s General Secretary Mr. Anup Chetia from Bangladesh is causing

some delay. ULFA's Chairman, Mr. Arabinda Rajkhowa perhaps calculates that the participation of Mr. Chetia in the peace negotiations will give more credence, and strengthen the legitimacy of the Rajkhowa-led faction of the ULFA. In our humble opinion, the Government of India should negotiate earnestly with Bangladesh to get Mr. Chetia extradited as soon as possible. We also have similar concerns regarding peace negotiations with the pro-talk faction of NDFB from Bodoland.

The healing process between the people of Assam and the terrorists can be achieved by organising a Peace Conference, as in South Africa under the wise leadership of Nelson Mandela. There have been unspeakable atrocities in Assam ranging from "Silent killing" (Reference: Justice Saikia Commission) to brutal assassinations of innocent people by ULFA. The bitter feelings between people can be soothed when those who committed crimes own up, express heartfelt remorse publicly, and offer unreserved apologies. Amnesty will be a part of this process.

We appeal to you to make it a law that when a terrorist group surrenders, they must also surrender their arms and ammunitions. This has been a serious anomaly in Assam in that the terrorists are allowed to keep their arms although they live in a protected camp. Reportedly, they do sneak out with their kalashnikovs leading often to serious and tragic consequences. Some of the "surrendered" ULFA persons were allowed to keep guns in the eighties for their protection; and this, as per media stories, is a contributory factor to the worsening of the law and order situation in Assam.

We think that the breakaway factions of terrorist groups who shun negotiations should be dealt with more effectively with a stronger hand; and formal international treaties should be negotiated by the NDA government with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan and China to seek co-operation to deal with the terrorists hiding in these countries.

Balkanization:

Arguably the most serious political constraint is balkanization of Assam. The process of balkanization in Assam is fundamentally a consequence of a policy of appeasement to emphatic assertion of tribal ethnicity in the form of violence perpetrated by organized terrorist groups. An ethnically heterogeneous Assam is progressively getting ethnically divided. This reveals that Assam's social and political fabric is torn asunder, as almost every ethnic group wants to express their identity by forming a separate state or autonomous council. Instead of becoming a multi-cultural society, Assam is fast moving towards becoming a society of many monocultures. The social and cultural osmosis, moulded by history over the centuries and more so during the freedom struggle, has steadily waned away after independence, and rapidly so during the last twenty-five years. And this has dealt a vasovagal affliction on political and social harmony.

This has happened not only because various ethnic groups have been suffering from economic deprivation and social backwardness, but also because the tribal groups believe that a form of ethnic discrimination has been perpetuated by Dispur in terms of perennial negligence of their concerns. Balkanization has occurred also because the mainstream middle-class Assamese, who dominated the politics of Assam in the post-independence days, failed to accommodate the aspirations of the

tribal people. Even after the Assam Movement, the AGP Government formed by the young leaders of the Movement, failed to accommodate, for example, the aspirations of the co-leaders from the Bodo community.

The notion that each ethnic group will be able to usher in a golden period of economic prosperity for itself by being a separate geographic and administrative entity is not only dangerous but it is also cruelly delusionary. You cannot divide your country into small political units, and expect to have faster economic growth. On the contrary, Assam will face a stagnant economy with the tribal welfare ultimately relying only on Central grants.

In conclusion, Honourable Prime Minister, Assam today is at critical throes of history with her social fabric torn asunder, and with an economy struggling to shed poverty. We all know what should be done on economic issues. However, the problem here always is the failure to deliver planned projects successfully because of poor governance. On the tangled social and political issues, we need to think and discuss openly, amicably, bravely and realistically so that we can work out a long-term strategy for social harmony..

Only a politically strong and intellectually wise leader with a strong character will be able to steer Assam out of the current economic and social turmoil. We, therefore, humbly call upon you, Honourable Prime Minister, to deliver Assam from poverty, corruption and social chaos so that economic prosperity and social harmony once again brighten up the land of the red river and the blue hills.

Kindest regards,

Yours truly,

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