

5th AFGB Conference
4th February 2017
Jubilee Room, YMCA Indian Student Hotel
Fitzroy Square, London
Executive Summary

The 5th Annual Conference of Assam Forum GB was to be held in December 2016 at the Kaziranga University, Assam. But was cancelled because of terrorist threats from Assam; and hence it is delayed till February 2017 and held in London. The conference opened with a welcome to the participants by the AFGB Chairman. We were fortunate that Professor Prodip Bhattacharyya [Founding Professor and first Dean of Academic Affairs at IIT Guwahati 1996-98, Second Vice-Chancellor of Tezpur University 1999-2004, and President of Ramanujam Mathematical Society of India 2000-2002] as our Chief Guest delivered a brief Inaugural speech. Professor Bhattacharyya appreciated the efforts made by AFGB to contribute towards improving the economic conditions in Assam, and encouraged us to carry on with the effort. He stated that the Assamese diaspora in the UK are full of professional people, who have expertise in various disciplines, can make valuable contributions to Assam. Professor Bhattacharyya also mentioned how he was active in London, when he was a student at the Imperial College, by being the Secretary General of Assam Association during 1968-69.

The programme of the 5th Conference includes the following presentations. (1) Dr. Diganta B, Das, Senior Lecturer at Loughborough University, on Sustainable Water Engineering: Where are we in Assam? (2) Dr. Jayanta B. Sarma, Consultant, Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, on Assam Healthcare Cooperative – a New Approach to Citizen-led Healthcare and (3) Dr. Tarun Chowdhury, Retired General Practitioner, on Revival of Rupsi Airport and its Benefits.

Chairman's Address:¹

The Chairman, Dr. Jitendralal Borkakoti, began by stating that the 5th Assam Forum Conference should have been a mega 2-day conference at Kaziranga University. He wanted to put this on record for posterity. On the theme of reduction of rural poverty, the designated speakers were Professor Kamal Malla Bujarbaruah (VC, Assam Agricultural University), Professor Madhurjya Bezbaruah (Gauhati University), Professor Sanjay Kumar Das (Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Research Complex at Barapani, Meghalaya) Professor Soundarjya Borbora (IIT Guwahati), Dr. Joydeep Baruah (Omeo Kumar Das Institute, Guwahati), and Mr. Bidyananda Barkakoty, Vice-Chairman, Tea Board of India). On the second theme of flood control, the designated speakers were Professor Arup Sarma, Professor Chandan Mahanta and Dr. Rajib Bhattacharjya from IIT Guwahati. On the third theme of water resources management, the designated speaker was Dr. Dignata Das (Loughborough University, England). And on the fourth theme of Assamese sub-nationalism and ethnic disharmony, the designated speaker was Professor Nani Gopal Mahanta (Gauhati University). The Assamese culprit or culprits must have enjoyed psychopathically exciting schadenfreude by successfully scuppering such a potentially brilliant and productive conference

After the 2015 conference, executive summary of the conference discussions were submitted to the Government of Assam. Our conference also had television exposure in Assam. Let me now briefly comment on what has been happening in Assam in light of what we discussed in the last conference. We had three themes: first to discuss how the identity of an Assamese can be defined; second, an analysis of gender problems and human trafficking in Assam, and third, a Panel discussion of governance and corruption in Assam.

On the identity issue, confusion and debate have been going on with slow realisation that it is not possible to have a culture-based identity. Historically the definitions of an Assamese, as pointed out by Smitana Saikia in the last conference, used one or more of the following parameters: (a) residents of Assam and their descendants, (b) linguistic group who speak Assamese, (c) ethnic Assamese, who in addition to speaking Assamese, are descendants and have some shared cultural norms, and/or (d) the Bhumiputras, the original inhabitants. The legal definition of a social group involves creating identities in terms of fixed immutable characteristics, but a group's characteristics are formed through cultural osmosis, and hence there is fluidity in the historical formation of identities. A legal identity of citizenship either through principle of *jus soli* (right of the soil, that is, the right of anyone born in a country to nationality of that country) or through the principle of *jus sanguinis* (right of blood, that is, a person's citizenship is determined by being a descendant of one or both parents who are citizens of that country). However, a social/cultural identity cannot have an absolute definition. Our conclusion, therefore, was that "who an Assamese is" cannot be defined. The serious implication is that we should endeavour to develop a civic identity of who an Assamese is by giving full recognition to our multiple identities. The civic identity simply declares that anyone born in Assam can claim to be an Assamese, while maintaining many other identities.

Rituparna Sarma and Rimli Das discussed the gender problems in Assam; and a few very constructive suggestions were made. In June 2016, it was reported the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR), for the 10th successive year, recorded the highest MMR in India which is 300 per 100,000 as compared to the national average of 167 per 100,000. This shameful situation is probably related to the finding of a survey that almost 33% of the females aged between 20 and 24 were married before the age of 18 years. Also, 46% of the Assamese women aged between 15 and 49 are anaemic. Human trafficking is going on unabated in the North East with a 250% increase between 2014 and 2015. Out of 1,539 human trafficking cases, only 20 from Meghalaya, 16 from Tripura, 6 from Nagaland and 3 from Arunachal Pradesh, but 1,494 were from Assam. Of the 612 cases of trafficking girls and women registered with Assam Police from 2008 to 2015, investigators could file charge-sheet for only 53 cases. Conviction rates are not known. However, during the same period of time, Police rescued 595 girls and women from the traffickers. Police did arrest 538 traffickers during this period, but entire exercise became futile as charge-sheets could not be filed within 90 days. It is encouraging to note that the Central government also adopted multi-pronged approach to combat this menace, although the State governments are responsible to tackle such crimes.

We also discussed in fair details, the problems of poor governance and transparency which is a euphemism for corruption. It was a Panel discussion led by Apurba Baruah, Dinesh Kakoti, Zaved Choudhury and myself. I am very happy to report that our BJP Chief Minister, Sarbananda Sonowal, has started cracking down on corruption. Following the

directive from the Chief Minister in September 2016, the Social Welfare Department started stream lining its functioning only to find some huge irregularities. It discovered fake entries of 900,000 ghost children enabling the culprits to siphon off Rs.150 crore per year for 15 years amounting to a scam of Rs.2,250 crore. They discovered 390 fake Anganwadi Centres that helped the criminals to siphon the looted money. Anganwadi Centres provide basic healthcare in Indian villages and are a part of the Indian public healthcare system. Basic healthcare activities include contraceptive counselling, nutrition education and supplementation, and also pre-school activities for children.

At the last Conference, the Chair reported the rumours in the media about corruption in the office of the Public Service Commission. Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti and All Assam Studnets' Union have been alleging irregularities, but Tarun Gogoi did not take any action. With enough evidence, the Dibrugarh Police arrested Mr. Rakesh Kumar Paul, the Chairman of APSC on 4th November 2016 at his office. Reportedly, Mr. Paul seems to be spilling the beans, telling how he paid three Ministers of the Gogoi Government, also how he made payments to the terrorist groups. The Chair hopes Mr. Paul will be convicted and will be sent to prison for a long period of time. It should be noted that job scams have been going on for a long time. The APSC Chairman during the Saikia Government was also caught red-handed, but nothing came out of it; and to the best of my knowledge, nobody went to prison. This is our Assam; that's how things get fizzled out mainly because of a lack of strong leadership from "clean" leaders. My consolation is that the BJP Government, led by an untainted leader, has taken eradication of corruption as a top priority. Chief Minister Sonowal alone will find it difficult to wipe out corruption unless he gets support from a dedicated group of influential politicians.

Poor governance and corruption seem to travel hand in hand. In a CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General) Report on State Finance, Year ending 31st March 2015, it is revealed that a large number of government authorities in Assam have not submitted annual accounts due up to 2014-15. The Report states: "There were instances of loss and misappropriation which remained unsettled with various departments for periods ranging from one to more than 25 years". Shamefully for Assam, 19,648 utilisation certificates for sanctioned grants aggregating Rs.14,332 crore paid to 53 Departments during the period 2001-02 to 2014-15 were in arrears. The Education Department holds the record with 12,454 pending utilisation certificates (87% of the total), amounting to Rs.2,806 crore, followed by the Finance (taxation) Department with 738 pending utilisation certificates, amounting to Rs.1009 crore. One would reasonably suspect that sanctioned money has not simply been utilised, and hence there are no utilisation certificates.

In an earlier conference, we noted that Majuli is likely to have significant benefits if the island gets the Unesco World Heritage status. For the third time in 2012, the World Heritage Committee rejected the application from the Government of India on the specific grounds that all necessary documents were not complete as per the latest operational Guidelines. Tragically, no nomination dossiers were submitted when the 38th session of the World Heritage Committee was held in Doha in 2014. And my understanding is that no dossiers have been submitted for the 2016 session either. Now the question is : why have not the dossiers been submitted for 2016? And what are the people of Assam or Majuli doing about it? The answer is nothing. And if we take the lead, we are threatened to stay away.

Assam HealthCare Cooperative Society²

Dr. Jayanata Sarma discussed some of the basic healthcare problems primarily facing the poor sections of people in Assam. Healthcare in India is dominated by the private sector which treats almost 70% of ailments. The poor often find themselves taking out unaffordable loans for hospitalisation.

In such a situation, following the cooperatives in housing, fisheries, handlooms and many other small-scale industries, Jayanta Sarma in cooperation with a few forward looking local persons in the Board of Directors, has established *Assam HealthCare Cooperative Society Ltd*, which is a Citizen driven enterprise. This is a registered society with an authorised share capital of Rs.10,000,000, and is first of its kind in the country without government patronage. The cooperative has so far raised Rs.700,000 as share capital. A premise has been rented on National Highway 37 near Betkushi, not far from Guwahati. From this office initial services will be provided.

The Cooperative will use its membership strength to enter into SLA (service level agreement) with existing service providers at a discounted rate. This will be of enormous help for the economically stressed people to get guidance for treatment and help for various medical tests etc.

This cooperative movement in medical services has been greatly appreciated by the AFGB members.

Sustainable Water Engineering

Dr. Diganta Das presented a detailed analysis of some latest technologies of water management, and discussed how these modern technologies could be utilised in Assam. While there is flood, there are also areas where Assam suffers from drought. By managing water resources more efficiently, such problems could be solved.

Rupsi Airport

Dr. tarun Das presented a short lecture on the revival of Rupsi airport in the Goalpara District. This is a World War II airport which is lying unused for a long time. Given the defence strategy in the context of the last Chinese aggression, and given the vast economic potential of the airport, Dr. Chowdhury has made a strong case for the revival of this airport.

1. Chairman's Speech, AFGB 5th Conference.
2. Assam HealthCare Cooperative Society Ltd.

Prepared by Dr. Jitendralal Borkakoti