

## Ethnic Conflicts and the Challenges of Civil Society in Assam

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### ABSTRACT

The term 'civil society' generally refers to those non-profit and non-political organisations who basically work for the welfare of the society. They are the 'third party' of the society. In recent times, the ethnic conflicts taking place in various parts have been challenging the civil society in Assam. These ethnic conflicts have been trying to assert the identity of the tribe in question and some of them are challenging the unity of the entire country. Since 2003 Assam was experiencing various ethnic conflicts such as Karbi-Kuki conflict in 2003, Bihari-Adivasi conflict in July 2005, in August 2005 Karbi-Khasi conflict, Karbi-Dimasa conflict in 2005 and Bodo-Muslim conflict in 2008 and so on. There are number of challenges that the civil society faces due to ethnic conflict and various reasons. Over population, internal security, inclusive growth, high rate of illiteracy etc. are some of the real challenges that the civil society in Assam faces. Consequently ethnic conflict and the challenge of civil society has become a crucial issue for the state of Assam. The objective of this seminar paper are as- the historical overview of the ethnic conflict, how can establish peace process, challenges of civil society etc. From this research, it can be said that ethnic conflict with other reason threatened the environment of civil society and it can create some problems towards democracy in India.

**Key Words :** Ethnic conflict, Assam, Civil society

### INTRODUCTION

The idea of civil society has made an important mark in the realm of politics in the most diverse settings, analyst and theoretical thinkers speak about civil society; its lack, its decline its promise and possibility. There have been several meanings attached to "Civil Society" In the west, therefore to understand Civil society in the western context and term it is needed in order to figure out what characterizes the functions and foundation of Civil Society. David Held offers intriguing ways and measure what could be termed as a sociological definition when he defines the "Civil society" is which retains a "distinctive character to the extent that it is made up of areas of social life the domestic world, the economic sphere, cultural activities and political interaction which are organized by private or voluntary arrangements between individuals and groups outside the direct control of the state" (Mertzer, 2002). Some add that to amount to civil

society, such political interaction cannot be fragmented and excessively particularistic: it has to constitute what Jurgen Habermas called the "public sphere"; Secondly, there is a normative political definition often overlapping this descriptive, sociological one: the idea that this public sphere should be strengthened at the expense of the state. This view can be expressed conservatively (the emphasis is on legality, private property, markets, and interest groups) or in more leftist way (the emphasis on empowering the groups prevented by allegedly prejudiced or selfish elites from interacting on the bias of equality with their fellow citizens) (Mertzer, 2002:206).

The term civil society is a broad concept and is hard to define. The term civil society embraces a wide range of actors including religious leaders, Women's organizations, NGOs, scholars and intellectuals. It includes organizations like trade unions, professional associations, chambers of commerce, ethnic associations and others. It also incorporates many other associations that exist

for purposes other than advancing specific social or political agendas such as religious organizations, student groups, community development associations, the human rights associations, the press, cultural organizations, sports clubs, and other forms of organizations outside the state arena. The role of the civil society has been broadly identified as facilitating interaction between the political arena and society at large. It generally work for the interest of the citizens. They are the 'third party' of the society.

Ethnic conflict has occupied a considerable length of history of different nations both developed and underdeveloped. The terms ethnic and ethnicity have their roots in the Greek word 'ethnos' which describes a community of common descent. Ethnic groups are a distinct category of population in a large society whose culture is usually different from the society's own. An ethnic conflict is a conflict between two or more contending ethnic groups. Ethnic conflict in India has religious, economic and sociological and political character. North East India including Assam has seen a lot in terms of violence and bloodshed from armed struggle to ethnic clashes Assam has reeled under unprecedented violence.

## METHODOLOGY

The data for the study purpose has been collected through secondary data. The secondary data have been collected from different journals, books, reports, peer viewed journals and other relevant documents available in the print media.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since 2003 Assam was experiencing various ethnic conflicts such as Karbi-Kuki conflict in 2003, Bihari-Adivasi conflict in July 2005, in August 2005 Karbi-Khasi conflict, Karbi-Dimasa conflict in 2005 and Bodo-Muslim conflict in 2008 and so on. There were violent clashes between October and March between militant Karbi and Kuki tribal groups in Karbi Anglong district, including the Singhason hill area. It is estimated that militants of the Kuki Revolutionary Army and the anti talk factions of the United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity together killed 85 persons, mostly men, in this period. The casualty includes atleast Kukis and Karbis.

Since the Congress took the rein of power in the State and in the Autonomous council in 2001, the hill people

have been mysteriously subjected to repeated ethnic conflagrations in the two hills claiming hundreds of innocent lives. Subversive elements have created conflict situations between tribal communities taking advantage of strong tribal sentiments and the contrariety of their political aspirations. The result were - in Dimasa- Hmar conflict occurred claiming outside one hundred lives and rendering thousand homeless; in 2004 subversive elements triggered off Karbi- Khasi conflict claiming atleast a dozen lives and uprooting atleast three thousand villagers. In all these the attempt has always been to deliberately to portray the Karbis and Dimasas as mean and intolerant aggressors with a view to isolate the Karbis and the Dimasas to destroy their ongoing political struggle against oppression and exploitation.

There is a history of violent conflict over land in Assam between the indigenous Bodotribals and Bengali Muslim settlers dating back to 1952 , with subsequent violent clashes occurring in 1979-1985, 1991-1994, 2008 and 2012. In the year 2008 about people were killed and more than 100000 made homeless as Muslims and Bodos clash in the districts of Udalguri and Darrang. In July 2012 violence erupted between the Bodos and Bangladeshi Muslims in the BTAD districts of Kokhrajjar, Chirang and Dhubri. Almost 70 people were killed and over 40000 people were displaced due to the violence, including both the Bodos and Bangladeshi Muslims. The immediate cause of the ethnic tensions between Bodos and Bengali speaking Muslims was when unidentified miscreants killed four Bodo youths at Joypur. This was followed by retaliatory attacks on local Muslims killing two and injuring several of them.

### Challenges of Civil Society in Assam:

Civil Society in Assam have experienced with largest number of challenges. Those are changeable in various time. Basically civil society had faced rigorous problems as well as challenges. Firstly, The idea of India is emerging challenge towards civil society. Therefore, there is no any idea of India. Idea came out from own circumstances- birth, family, upbringing, education and the like. That idea is also shaped by our experiences like success and failure, joy and sorrow. It is also influenced by others such as family members, adversaries, colleagues and superiors. Ultimately, each of one forms an idea of India. In case of most people, the idea of India is vague, undefined and with barely visible contours; yet with a little prodding, it is possible to draw out every person

to define his or her idea of India. For instance, it creates challenge towards the civil society in Assam. The second challenge is the challenge of inclusive growth. Because India is a poor country. Inclusive growth will also mean that the government must have more resources to promote such growth. That means, capacity to pay, people must pay more by way of taxes. Therefore, central government raised the central taxes. For instance, the economy steams ahead in full throttle and high growth rates become a regular feature, the demand for inclusive growth will become louder and more insistent. As a nation, it must be prepared to respond to the legitimate and anguished cry of the very poor and disadvantaged sections of the people. Hence, it must make larger allocations for education and health care; for rural infrastructure such as rural roads; for drinking water and sanitation; for subsidies on food and fuel; and for cash support to certain sections of the people such as the aged and the disabled. Inclusive growth is a not-so-glamorous process that has the average poor person at the centre of all policies, but that is what it will need for the next 40 years or so if it is to win and retain support for economic reforms and liberalization. Lastly, the challenge of internal security. It is formidable. Over the years, old problems have festered and new problems have erupted. The challenge of internal security has two dimensions. The source of threat to internal security are as naxalism, terrorism, other insurgents etc. basically in northeast India.

70 years after the journey began, India is a stronger and more prosperous nation, but it is not yet a nation that has found peace and harmony. Nor is it yet a fair and just society. India is not unique in this respect and, therefore, there is no need to shrink in mortification. Every challenge tests the will and determination of the people in Northeast India's state Assam.

### **Role of Civil Society in our Society and Ethnic Conflicts:**

One of the most significant fallout of the state and militant violence that has hit Assam for the past years has been the growing marginalization of the average citizen. Caught between the violence let loose by those who represent the state and those who wish to break it, Civil Society has been finding it increasingly difficult to carve out a justifying position in resolving the conflict dynamics that has shaped its present form, which raises grave concern (Misra, 2005.ed.).

The importance of civil society for advancing peace

process and throughout the challenges towards civil society in Assam. During this era the number of armed intra-state and violent ethnic dramatically.

India's Northeast has been the theatre of the earliest and longest-lasting insurgency and ethnic conflicts in the country. The fear of immigrants continues to haunt the minds of the Assamese. Immigration in Assam is believed to have created pressures on land, caused unemployment to the Assamese people claiming themselves as native to the region, fomented social tensions and created ethnic and communal riots. No authentic estimate is yet available on the actual number of non-Assamese foreigners settled in Assam. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP; Assam people's council) that emerged from out of the movement and formed the government in 1985 did little to deport foreigners. The party's performance in deporting non-Assamese was dismal. Many immigrants who settled in Assam several generations ago assimilated into Assamese society and report Assamese as their mother tongue.

The immigration issue had occasionally burst into the open in the politics of Assam state since independence. It was only in 1980 that the Assam Literary Society (Assam Sahitya Sabha), one of the organisations leading the Assam movement came forward, and changed 'bahiragats' (outsiders) into 'Bideshis' (foreigners). Sources said before any concrete headway is made, civil society groups such as the Axom Sahitya Sabha will have a very crucial role in aggregating and consolidating the many communities that make up the greater Assamese community. Axom Sahitya Sabha is a socio-cultural body dedicated to promote the state's culture and literary activities. It has over 1,000 branches in the state and was one of the first such bodies to oppose ULFA's violent movement. ULFA was established in on April 7, 1979, it was not until 1983 that the organization surfaced in the public arena and people become aware of its political presence in Assam. It started as a more militant stream of the Assam movement and gradually broke away from the moderate forces that were associated with it.

North East India has been a hotbed of insurgencies, State action and ethnic violence over the decades. All these have resulted in the displacement of communities affected by violence and chronic insecurity. In most cases, the assistance extended to these displaced communities consists of poorly maintained relief camps and at best some monetary help. Left to their own devices by an unconcerned state, these displaced families diffuse into the landscape joining the troop of impoverished

migrants. The multi ethnic Karbi Anglong District of Assam has been no exception to this violence after witnessing insecurity as a result of communal and insurgent violence. After the particularly violent period between 2003 and 2005 (where killings took place during clashes between Karbis, Dimasas and Kukis), there were a large number of families housed in relief camps; up to 40,000 people at one point. In this scenario the administration came up with a scheme to rehabilitate families who could not return to their original villages. It involved relocating the affected villages around the District Headquarters of Diphu with an aim of providing a secure living environment. These mainly entailed reorganizing smaller villages scattered over a large area into a single large village unit which was located close to roads but far away from their old village sites and consequently their agricultural land. This rehabilitation effort is probably the only post conflict rehabilitation program that has been implemented in the whole of the North East. Over the years Northeast as a whole and Assam in particular has seen a lot in terms of violence and bloodshed. From armed struggle to ethnic clashes Assam has reeled under unprecedented violence. Armed revolutionaries and Government have an equal share in making Assam prone to such bloodshed every now and then keeping the common masses at the receiving end. If the armed organizations have spilled blood in the name of revolution and sovereignty, the government has got its license to kill in the name of bringing peace. The lawmakers have become the lawbreakers and the so called rescuers have also turned a blind eye towards all the misdoings. From ethnic clashes in between the ethnic communities to vague killings in the name of revolution has long been a problem of Assam.

### **Conclusion:**

Ongoing different ethnic conflicts are creating dangerous situation towards the challenge of civil societies. The problem of ethnic conflict is more complex. Because in this situation, civil society groups play diverse roles in Assam. In order to make conflicting parties reach

middle ground, civil society groups and initiatives must establish them as a socially powerful force.

However, such challenges stop the pursuit of civil society group's interest. This challenges are different in different manners earlier mentioned it. The government of India and different civil society groups needs to actively engage for peace process in different ethnic conflicts. There is also an ardent need to the civil societies in resolving the ethnic conflicts.

Thus this paper has provided an overview of various approaches towards the challenges of civil society in Assam.

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