

The Silver Lining

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This letter to the Editor is in reference to the article titled *Assembly Elections of India, 2021: Revisiting Assam*, written by Dr Pranjit Sarma and Dr Rituparna Bhattacharyya. I applaud the authors for their pedantic analysis about the whole process of the Assam Assembly election 2021 and how Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was able to retain its power for the second term in the state. In doing so, the authors have critically analysed the development achievements of the state vis-à-vis contributions of Mr Himanta Biswa Sarma, the current Chief Minister of Assam. The people of Assam indeed witnessed ‘development politics’ (Sarma and Bhattacharyya, 2021, p.12) in the state from the time Mr Sarma won the election in 2001. In my perspective, Mr Sarma’s ideology of ‘politics of development’ in the state of Assam can be compared to the principles of Bharat Ratna, Sri Gopinath Bordoloi, Sri Bishnuram Medhi, Sri Mahendra Mohan Choudhury and down to earth politician, Sri Golap Barbor. This is because all of them openly declared that their supreme concern was/is the interest of Assam and its people. I do not claim to be a political observer, but the people of Assam will agree that no Chief Minister of Assam except for those mentioned above four dared to publicly advocate the cause of Assam. Other Chief Ministers, perhaps, feared that such utterances would be construed as chauvinistic by the Central Government.

I acclaim, particularly Mr Sarma’s open-hearted approach to The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) supremo Sri Paresh Baruah, which is a point to reckon. When Mr Sarma joined BJP, whole print and electronic media were agog with comments and criticism. Mainly, the political parties against BJP wanted to project Mr Sarma as a corrupt politician involved in many a scam.

Even some tried to label him a terrorist. I contend that a person changes with growing age.

Rishi Valmiki and Rishi Aurobindo are a stark reminder of this fact. I believe that Himanta Biswa Sarma, then, and Himanta Biswa Sarma now are two different persons. This is equally true about the boys and girls who joined ULFA and other terrorist outfits of North East India (Bhattacharyya, 2018). The majority of them sincerely believed that Assam’s enormous resources were exploited—with the active support of State and Central Governments by the greedy capitalist from the other parts of India. We in Assam know that this is at least partially true. Even the benefits of sincere efforts of previous State Governments, like giving transport and other subsidies to various industries, were usurped by many traders from outside the state. Even lands taken for industrial purposes were misused by building multi-storeyed flats and housing colonies. With rampant corruption and colossal unemployment, the perception of economic exploitation was enough to drive hundreds of young boys and girls to numerous extremist groups like ULFA and the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB). But this sense of alienation and perception of exploitation started in the early sixties. For those of us who were in schools and colleges at that time, Prime Minister Sri Jawaharlal Nehru’s famous lament “my heart goes to the people Assam” still remains a joke.

Another example is that Assam’s perennial and significant flood problem is not recognised as a national problem until today. My hope about the new Chief Minister soared after his few immediate actions. The way he has explained his Government’s commitment to the promises made in the election manifesto is refreshing. Abolition of government religious schools, helping the victims of microfinance companies

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fraud, clearing the encroachment of religious lands and reserving sixteen of seventeen constituencies for indigenous people of Assam is few such promises that the people of Assam are anxiously looking for fulfilment.

His statement regarding the National Register of Citizens (NRC) that the State Government will re-verify the data published in NRC is welcome. We all know that since the matter of NRC was taken seriously by the honourable Supreme Court, the then Congress Government under Sri Tarun Gogoi tried everything to scuttle the process. They even organised a violent protest against NRC verification at Barpeta to show that working on NRC may create a severe law and order problem in Assam. Indeed after the Barpeta protest, the pace of NRC verification work slowed down throughout the state.

Similarly, the gesture of giving the cabinet status to the Chief Executive Members of all three autonomous councils created under the Sixth-Schedule of the Indian Constitution — Bodoland Territorial Council, Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council and Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council will go a long way in building a lasting friendship amongst different ethnic groups of Assam.

However, Mr Himanta Biswa Sarma is lucky on three counts. They are:

- First, he inherited an Administration— thanks to the outgoing Chief Minister, Sri Sarbananda Sonwal— an Assam free from communal and ethnic violence. Further another plus point that will help the new administration is the bold way Sri Sonwal stood against corruption.
- Second, he has a dedicated and competent team of ministers. Even the two ministers from Assam Gana Parishad seem to be motivated by Mr Sarma's leadership.
- Third, Sri Jishnu Baruah as Chief secretary and Sri Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta as Director-General of Police, the Chief Minister, will find the two most competent, level headed and well-meaning officers.

My age is seventy-seven. All of us who are above seventy remember the dreadful days when extremism was at its peak in the state of Assam. Some of us were scared about our sons, daughters, brothers and sisters joining terrorist groups like ULFA and NDFB. Many were afraid of physical harm to them and their near and dear ones. Similarly, children were wondering whether their parents would be victims of many nefarious and cruel activities of so-called liberators. On top of it, the people of Assam had witnessed that their own elected Government indulged in secret killings. This was when the then Chief Minister of Assam, Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta aped the Punjab model of killing unfortunate and innocent relatives of those suspected of being involved in terrorism.

As a result, a whole generation—that is, of our sons' and daughters'—grew up in trauma and panic. Many of them lost academic years and drifted away from their studies. Now we do not want that our grandchildren should suffer the same fate. I hunch that the new Chief Minister has a workable equation with ULFA supremo Sri Paresh Baruah. Sri Baruah also hinted that he is comfortable with our honourable Chief Minister. Even the international Human Rights Commission has felt that this is the right time for peace talks. Through this letter, I make a humble appeal to Sri Paresh Baruah to consider our grandchildren's future. I do not want to jump the gun. But, to me, indeed, it is a silver lining. Hope, by the grace of God, peace will return to this troubled land of us, and the silver lining will turn into a golden reality.

References

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