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The Role of Civil Society in Bringing Peace in Assam

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Abstract:

Civil society has a very strong history. If we look into the successful social movements from the past we can found that civil societies always played the most important role in mobilizing the masses. In India civil societies are playing vital role in the post-colonial period. The post-colonial India witnesses many social and political conflicts in every state. In the North Eastern region of India conflict took a violent form in the name of insurgent movement. Indian government responded very strictly to it and many innocent civilians were being killed both by the Army and the insurgent groups. In such a situation civil society's intervention became essential. The state of Assam also started witnessing a great turbulence from majority of its population during the late 80s, where some was demanding protection from the illegal migrants from Bangladesh at the same time others were demanding complete sovereignty from India. The violence continued more than decades which compel Assam's civil society to intervene. In this paper the author will try to interpret the role of civil society in the conflicting situation of Assam.

Key Words: Government, Civil Society, Assam, Conflict, ULFA.

Introduction: The globalization and interdependence makes states role limited within the state itself, on the other hand its gives more influencing power to the civil society organizations of the states. The presence of civil society strengthens the legitimacy, accountability and transparency on intergovernmental decision making. Civil society organizations take part in every aspect of states now days. It has its influence in the functioning of state machinery. Civil Society organizations include various NGO s as well as SHG s. Civil Society refers to the web of social relations that exists in the space between the state, the market and the private life of families and individuals. Civil Society is the network that enables coordination and cooperation between people and state. Civil society can be seen as a school of Democracy where people can learn how to act as civilians and feel what democracy actually means. Civil society gives voice to people or social groups that don't feel represented well in democracy or shed light on issues that the state bodies don't seem to pay attention to. Civil society as a concept has a rich history (Edwards, 2009:2). Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil society often

populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women organizations, faith based organizations, professional associations, self-help groups, social movements, business associations and advocacy groups (Alvers, 2009:5). Antonio Gramsci refers that “civil society is the site of rebellion against the orthodox as well as the construction of cultural and ideological hegemony, expressed through families, schools, universities and the media as well as voluntary associations. Since all these institutions are political dispositions of citizens” (*Opcit*, 8)

Objectives of the study:

The objectives of the present study are:

- 1) To study the role of civil society regarding the conflict in Assam.
- 2) To study the importance of the intervention of the civil society to solve the conflict.

Methodology: The methodology for this study is primarily descriptive and analytical. The data for the study was collected from primary and secondary sources. The Primary data has been collected through interviews with civil society members and ULFA leaders. The Secondary sources include books, articles, newspapers, magazines and journals that present commentaries of Civil Society, ULFA and Government policies. Qualitative analysis of the data was done.

Assam’s Civil Society and its Role: Though civil society is a strong actor of a state in the case of Assam civil society has been increasingly losing its voice and this naturally is a matter of grave concern (Misra, 2005:90). The marginalization of civil society in this country has been a long process and may be related to the gradual erosion of the credibility of the Indian State and its emergence of a coercive force. The failure of the state as an institution and the rise of insurgency have created a situation where civil society must make use of what little democratic space is left and try to play a positive role (Misra, 2002:3781-3785). One of the most significant fall-outs of state and militant violence that has hit Assam in the past 20 years or so has been the growing marginalization of the average citizen. If this continues civil society of Assam will lost its value as well as the importance. In Assam the violent conflict has started from 1979 between state and the frustrated youth of Assam, but civil society take a long time to intervene. United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), launched a war against the Government of India in 1979 demanding *Swadhin Asom* (independent Assam), at that point of time they represented a mindset, a suppressed voice which is deeply engrained in Assam’s psyche. The issues raised by ULFA are deeply rooted in the Assamese civil society. There are differences regarding their path of violence and the objective of an independent Assam—a *Swadhin Asom*, but the issues of negligence, exploitation and appropriation of resources by the Indian state in a ‘colonial’ manner is shared by the greater society (Dutta, 2014:43-54). But at that time civil society of Assam was neither convinced with ULFA nor with the government.

Nagaland, which is a neighboring state of Assam also faces the same insurgency problem like Assam, but the civil society groups of Nagaland have taken the initiative in restoring peace to that strife-torn region, example can be given of Andhra Pradesh also where an

organization called the Committee of Concerned Citizens has, succeeded in convincing both the Government and the People's War activists to come to the negotiating table (Misra, 2002:3781-3785). Over 50 years of insurgent violence and wide-scale state repression in Nagaland have resulted in politicizing the entire civil society to such an extent that in recent years it has come to play an increasingly decisive role in the peace process - a role in which the elected representatives have totally failed. We cannot find these types of civil society intervention in case of Assam.

Today in conflict situation like Assam, the role of civil society has been marginalized. After a long two decades of disturbances the situation now changes in Assam. Assam was under the situation of tremendous violence and terror for more than three decades due to the uprising of ULFA from 1979 till 2010 who demanded Assam's Sovereignty from India. It was only in 2010 when the top leaders of ULFA were being handed over to Government of India by the Bangladesh Government the peace talks started with the intervention of Assam's civil society. While the peace-talk is started with one group of ULFA, the other group is still subversive, civil society of Assam has to play a very important role in bringing these two groups together. In the present condition of Assam the civil society must act to bring these two groups together for the durable peace in Assam.

Two major initiatives by the Civil Society of Assam:

PCG Initiative: In the year 2005 ULFA nominated an 11 members group (PCG) to start negotiation with the government. Dr.Mamoni Roysom Goswami was appointed as the chief coordinator and Mr.Reboti Phukan was appointed as the coordinator of the group. The other 9 members included, Mukul Mahanta, Arup Borbora, Dr.Brajen Gogoi, Ajit Kumar Bhuyan, Haidar Hussain, Hiranya Saikia, Dilip Patgiri, Lachit Bordoloi and Diganta Konwar (Borbora, 2010:18). With PCG the first round of talks took place in October 2005, the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh briefly attended the meeting but, much to the PCG's consternation, the Indian army continued military operations against ULFA. This reflected the powerful influence of national security hardliners in government. The second round of talks was held in February 2006; however, the continued violence and counter-violence dampened expectations (Baruah, 2009:951-974).

SJA Initiative: This is regarded as the most significant initiative from the civil society of Assam, to solve the ULFA matter. After Sheikh Hasina Government of Bangladesh handed over the ULFA leaders to the Indian government on December 2010, this initiative was taken up by the Sanmilito Jatiya Abhibartan (SJA) under the leadership of Prof Hiren Gohain in the same year in Guwahati. More than 109 civil society organizations across Assam gathered in Guwahati. The Abhibartan was held at ITA complex of Machkhowa, Guwahati. They prepared a charter of demand on behalf of ULFA and ULFA leaders also agree to it. The present discussion between government and ULFA are going on the basis of the charter of demand. It is notable that after so many initiatives have failed the SJA initiative has succeeded to a significant extent to bring ULFA and government to the negotiation table.

Conclusion: It is almost a decade of the handover of the ULFA leaders to the government of India by Bangladesh government, but till now there is no constructive outcome of the peace process. Meanwhile there are also changes in the political scenario of India as well as of Assam. From Congress (I) the power has shifted to BJP in both central and state government. After Mr. Narendra Modi becomes the Prime Minister of India there were only two rounds of discussions with the ULFA leaders in the long eight years. The people of Assam bring BJP into power for the first time in the political history of Assam. Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal who was affirmed as “*Jatiyo Bir*” by All Assam Students Union (AASU,) after his winning over on the IMDT act in 2005 became the first Chief Minister under BJP’s regime in Assam. He shares an emotional attachment with the people of Assam due to his past assignments, but during his tenure he did very little for the ongoing peace talk between government and ULFA. The delay in peace talk will nullify the willingness of the government in resolving any political conflict through dialogue. At the same time it will also give accountability to the hard core faction of ULFA. The pandemic has already changed the economic structure of the state, youth are frustrated with no jobs and lack of economic assistance, there is every chance of some of them to join with Mr.Paresh Barua. This will worsen the situation of Assam.

The role of civil society becomes very important in the present scenario. The previous acts of civil society will become void if the peace talk will not end soon between the government and ULFA leaders. As with the passing time there will be more challenges in front of the civil society of Assam. It is vital for the civil society to make the Government and both the faction of ULFA to sit together and to work for the greater progress of Assam.

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List of Informants:

Informant1: ULFA's Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, at Guwahati on 03.02.2018

Informant2: Prof.Hiren Gohain at Guwahati, on 20-06-2017

Informant3: Kaberi Kachari Rajkonwar at Guwahati, on 09-12-2021