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India and China at Energy Crossroads: Bilateralism and Sectoral Interventions

By

Soumya Bhowmick*

Abstract

The growing economies of India and China give rise to various opportunities for both nations, while posing certain global challenges for meeting their burgeoning energy requirements. Since securing energy resources has become extremely essential for the emerging economies, both countries are exploring ways towards innovation in the domain of energy efficient processes, and bilateral partnerships for further development. This paper aims to analyze the energy diplomacy between India and China, while focusing on the individual institutional efforts made by both the countries, in various energy dominant sectors. The study also explores the ways in which renewable energy could prove to be imperative for fulfilling their future energy demands.

Keywords: Energy Sector Interventions, Sino-Indian Partnerships, Energy Institutions, Energy Efficiency.

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Introduction: Sino-Indian Energy Cooperation

A stable and secure supply of energy is crucial for the growth of emerging economies such as India and China. Both the nations are embracing entrepreneurship and technological innovation in the non-traditional energy sectors as an additional means of supporting their rapidly growing economies. The governments of these nations are

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offering incentives concerning the installation of solar energy, wind energy, and bio-energy units, and are encouraging joint ventures, technology transfers, as well as promoting effective research and development.¹

Sino-India relations are viewed from the perspective of traditional security issues such as border disputes, India's non-participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the rising influence of China in the Indian Ocean etc.² The existence of these geopolitical characteristics has created suspicions in extending the cooperation to a full-fledged arrangement on energy cooperation. Nevertheless, India and China have collaborated on energy security by forming the Oil Buyers' Group (OBG) in 2018, and through the OBG, both countries are expected to cooperate in negotiating prices to reduce the dominance of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).³ Other examples of collaborative projects between China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) include oil project investments in Sudan, Yadavaran oil fields in Iran, Petro-Canada energy assets in Syria, etc. In 2006, ONGC and China Sinopec jointly acquired stakes of Columbian oil company, Omimex de Colombia for US\$ 850 million.⁴ In 2019, India and China created a joint working group on oil and gas⁵ - the first cooperative institutionalized setup on energy issues.

Recognizing the need for innovations for green and sustainable growth transitions, the two nations launched the China-India Low Carbon Study in the earlier part of the last decade⁶ - a collaboration between the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), China and The Energy and Resource Institute (TERI) in India. The agreement signed included cooperation in enhancing energy efficiency in the energy-intensive industries of Cement, Paper and Steel through the facilitation of visits of Indian representatives to China, technology exchange in improving the energy efficiency of Thermal Power plants, and knowledge sharing between the Indian and the Chinese Energy Service Companies (ESCOs).

The three objectives, namely - clean energy, smart grids, and ultra-high voltage (UHV) transmission form a crucial part of the scheme of Global Energy Interconnection (GEI) which helps China in its pursuit of interconnecting the nationally fragmented grid and electricity markets into a global power grid.⁷ In pursuance of accomplishing these objectives, a non-profit, non-governmental, international organization known as the Global Energy Interconnection Development and

Cooperation Organization (GEIDCO) came into existence in collaboration with the UN in the year 2016.⁸ Headquartered in Beijing, China, the organization with the inputs of the comprising institutions, individuals, associations, and firms, aims to meet power demands with cleaner energy alternatives, thereby, globally propelling the fundamentals of sustainable energy. In 2017, the Adani Group joined the organization as a member – the first Indian conglomerate to enact such partnerships with GEIDCO.⁹ This pursuit would make it possible to achieve significant capacity levels, maximize economies of scale, as well as provide access to electricity at low costs in both the countries.¹⁰

The discussions on the Sino-Indian partnership for exploring energy opportunities have marked a two-decade time period.¹¹ However, in order to sustainably facilitate the energy structure transformation, in the purview of Sustainable Development Goal 7 (SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy) as well as the successive reports on the country-wise performances, a revisionist approach may be essential for Sino-Indian partnerships in the long run. The following table outlines the performance of both the countries (over the last three years) in terms of specific SDG 7 indicators taken into consideration by the UN while estimating the relevant indices:

Table 1: SDG 7 Indicator-wise Performance

Indicators/ Year	2021		2020		2019		2018		2017	
	India	China	India	China	India	China	India	China	India	China
Access to electricity (percentage)	95.2	100	92.6	100	84.5	100	79.2	100	79.2	100
Access to clean fuels (percentage)	41	59.3	41	92.3	41	59.3	34.2	57.2	36	54.9
CO2 from fuels & electricity (MtCO2/TWh)	1.5	1.4	1.5	1.1	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.7	1.7

Source: Authors’ own, with inputs from *Sustainable Development Solutions Network*¹²

According to the UN Sustainable Development Solution Network SDG Report 2021¹³ India scores at 60.07/100 (rank 120 out of 165) and China at 72.06/100 (rank 57 out of 165), in terms of the

overall achievement of the SDGs. However, in terms of energy, that is SDG 7, ‘significant challenges remain’ for both the countries.

According to the World Economic Forum’s Energy Transition Index (ETI), India fares better than China in 2020(both countries perform worse than more than 60 percent of the nations included)¹⁴while China performs far better than India in 2021.¹⁵The revisions made to calculate Index in 2021 allowed the countries to score better who shifted with their energy systems away from fossil fuels. Both ‘Transition Readiness’ and ‘System Performance’ are considered to be integral components of the index which underscores the importance of an effective energy transition as a “timely transition towards a more inclusive, sustainable, affordable and secure energy system that provides solutions to global energy-related challenges, while creating value for business and society, without compromising the balance of the energy triangle.”¹⁶In 2020, India held a better rank but stood behind China in terms of the ‘Transition Readiness’ which includes energy efficiency enabling dimensions such as energy system structure, capital and investment, regulations and political commitment, human capital and consumer participation, infrastructure and innovative business environment and finally, institutions and governance. In 2021, India held a worse rank than it did the previous year, but out performs China based on ‘System Performance’ which is concerned with the ‘Energy Triangle’ that brings together the three domains of energy access and security, environmental sustainability and economic development. Although, India and China performed worse than the global average of 57.6 in 2021 but have realized immense gain in the last decade with their increasing energy demands.¹⁷The following table depicts the associated scores for India and China (and the US, which scores much better than both the countries on all the parameters):

Table 2: Energy Transition Index 2020-21

Countries	Year	Global Rank (out of 115 countries)	Energy Transition Index Scores (percentage)	System Performance (percentage)	Transition Readiness (percentage)
US	2021	24	67	70.7	62.3
	2020	32	60.7	66	56
China	2021	68	57	55.5	58
	2020	78	50.9	50	52
India	2021	87	53	58.2	47.3
	2020	74	51.5	54	49

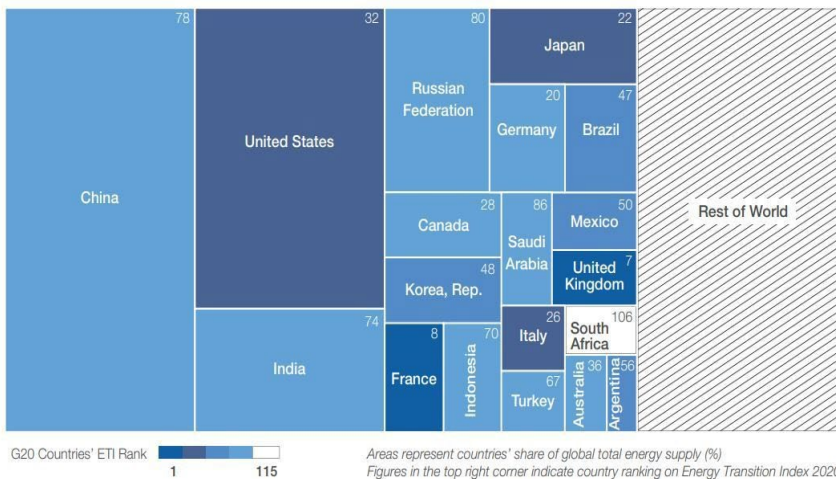
Source: *World Economic Forum*^{18,19}

Energy issues also formed an important element in the India-China Strategic Economic Dialogue – in the first India-China Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) held in 2011²⁰, both the countries agreed to cooperate on energy issues, including strengthening cooperation on energy efficiency and renewable energy. In the 4th India-China SED, the Working Group on Energy focused on faster cooperation in the manufacture of solar modules in India, and extending cooperation in India's Solar Rooftop Initiative.²¹ In the same SED, India proposed cooperation in underground coal mining and coal gasification and China proposed knowledge sharing in clean coal technologies.

Furthering such similar commitments, in the 5th India-China SED, both the nations agreed upon strengthening the cooperation in the promotion of renewable energy - wind and solar energy, and speeding of cooperation in the solar module in India.²² Reiterating similar commitments, in the 6th India-China SED 2019, the Working Group on Energy recognized the importance of future collaborations in e-mobility, clean coal technology domains, smart grid & grid integration, and smart meters.²³ Evidently, a constant institutional engagement through the India-China SEDs has built momentum on the matters related to energy, and in particular - energy efficiency and renewable energy.

Institutional Efforts: China and India

Because of the growing importance of China and India in the global energy scenario, much emphasis must be laid on the energy efficiency measures in these two countries. What appears as a matter of grave concern is – even though China, US and India depict the largest shares of the global energy supply, both India and China score abysmally low in terms of their Energy Transition Index (ETI) components explained before (in comparison to the US).²⁴ The following figure shows the relative energy share and performance of the G20 countries in 2020.

Figure 1: G20 Countries' Share of Global Total Energy Supply, 2017 and ETI Rankings 2020

Source: *World Economic Forum*²⁵

Energy efficiency governance is the combination of enabling structures, institutional systems, and cooperating processes and mechanisms - working together to facilitate the adoption of energy efficiency strategies, policies and programmes.²⁶ The Copenhagen Center for Energy Efficiency (C2E2), which is a partnership under the United Nations Energy Programme (UNEP) and Technological University of Denmark (DTU), is a nodal agency for the Energy Efficiency Hub of the UN Sustainable Energy for All (SE for ALL) initiative²⁷- it represents multi-stakeholder partnerships between the governments, private sectors and the civil societies that are also relevant for India and China's domestic scenario.

Interventions in China

In China, the National Development and Reforms Commission (NDRC) includes energy efficiency as one of its primary responsibilities - it cooperates with the State Councils and provides guidance, coordination and supervision for energy efficiency.²⁸ The subsequent Five Year Plans (FYP) have been giving importance to energy efficiency in China. For the first time, compulsory energy-saving and emissions-reduction target was set in the Eleventh FYP (2006-2010).²⁹ It set the 20 percent reduction target of energy intensity below the 2005 level by 2010. Additionally, in the Twelfth FYP (2011-15), the energy intensity reduction target of 16 percent below 2010 levels was to be achieved.

Along the same lines, the Thirteenth FYP (2016-2020) set an energy intensity reduction target of 15 percent below the 2015 levels and a limit on energy use at 5 billion tons of standard coal equivalent.³⁰ The plans also have similar carbon reduction targets. Apart from the FYPs, the NDRC and the Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) of China has implemented the 'One Hundred Energy Efficiency Standard Promotion Programme' - the standards covered include: fundamental standards for energy saving, limiting the unit product of energy consumed, energy capacity and efficiency of end products amongst others.³¹

The Chinese GDP grew at 7.8 percent per year on average. However, the energy intensity declined by 18.2 percent, which exceeded the national target of a 16 percent reduction. The International Energy Agency termed this achievement of China as "global efficiency heavyweight."³² The factors that could be attributed to this success are proactive and strong leadership, clear quantitative targets, adaptability at the local levels, and the presence of dynamic market mechanisms for the energy efficiency services. Nevertheless, the energy intensity of China is well above the world average.

China has put forth a detailed policy framework to enhance energy efficiency until 2030. The thirteenth FYP advocated the implementation of 'Dual Control' both on total energy consumption and energy intensity by 2020.³³ Building based on 'Dual Control,' the 'Energy Supply and Consumption Revolution Strategy' (2016-2030) has been put forth - it takes into account the transition of energy from the quantity expansion to the quality improvement while realizing the limited availability of resources and the environmental carrying capacity. In this regard, the use of renewable energy, natural gas and nuclear energy is set to grow, and the consumption of high-carbon fossil energy is set to reduce substantially. Further, the energy consumption per unit of GDP is expected to reach the current global average, and the energy efficiency of some of the main industrial products are expected to forge ahead to be among the most advanced in the world. By 2030, the total energy consumption of China is projected to be capped at 6 Gtce (Gigatonne of Coal Equivalent), and the new energy demand will bank on clean and sustainable energy.³⁴ Additionally, the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) also encompass the efficiency targets for the newly constructed coal power stations.³⁵ A few sectoral interventions in China are as follows:

A) Power Generation:

As the Chinese economy was rising, its growth was fueled by the coal plants and today, China has been aggressively pursuing cleaner and efficient coal plants. For instance, it has adopted ultra-supercritical (USC) power plants which are not only cleaner but also yield more energy. The USC technology that the Chinese government has pushed for, accounts for 92 percent of the nation's top 100 capacity.³⁶ The pursuit of efficiency in China was comprised of the objective that any coal-fired power unit that did not meet the efficiency standard of 310 gce per kilowatt-hour by 2020 has to be upgraded.³⁷

B) Buildings:

At present, the Chinese per capita residential energy consumption (REC) is 30.2 percent of the US and 68.4 percent of Japan, respectively.³⁸ The commercial and residential buildings constitute a significant part of the national energy consumption due to the continuous growth of the Chinese economy and rapid urbanization. The country has been pursuing the Energy Building Codes (EBC); programmes such as the Existing Building Retrofit and Heating Metering Programme in their northern regions through which they retrofit their existing buildings with energy-efficient materials; programmes such as phasing out inefficient applicants (Incandescent Lighting Phasing-out Programme); promoting appliance energy standards and labelling; and offering subsidies to install energy-efficient and renewable energy appliances.³⁹

C) Transportation:

Transportation and associated energy requirements are set to rise due to the growing number of people living in urban areas, and with people using private vehicles. The average energy intensity of the transportation sector peaked at 0.26 tce/1000 t-km during the years 2003 and 2004, and although it has reduced, the transportation sector is still moving towards a high energy intensity range. This is because the share of railways and waterways in China are reducing, and the share of public transport is declining due to the expansion of private cars.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, China has been promoting energy efficiency in the transportation sector – the Chinese government has been undertaking projects to expand public transport, implement fuel economy and standards, offer subsidies for energy efficient vehicles, implement vehicle taxations and so on. Subway systems and urban railways have also been expanding in the urban areas in China alongside increasing

the fleet of electric vehicles – in 2016, based on operating mileage in Shenzhen, China, the fleet of electric buses consumed 72.9 percent less energy than diesel buses.⁴¹

D) Industry:

Energy consumption in the industrial sector has grown in tandem with the economic outputs because of low levels of energy efficiency. The industrial sector accounts for two-thirds of total energy use and thereby is the largest consuming sector of energy in China.⁴² The six major (building materials, steel, non-ferrous metals, paper-making, chemical engineering and petrochemicals) energy intensive industries registered an annual energy consumption growth rate of 10 percent.⁴³ China undertook 'Ten Thousand Enterprises Programme' during the 12th FYP to target the biggest industrial consumers of energy. Enterprises that consume 10,000 tce (tonnes of coal equivalent) or more annually, are covered under the programme. In this top-down programme, energy saving objectives were allocated to the enterprises which are required to meet the targets. Other mechanisms in this sector include the Energy Performance Contracting (EPC), Energy Conservation Funds, and Differential Electricity Pricing Policy (DEPP).⁴⁴

Interventions in India

In the case of India, the energy efficiency efforts⁴⁵ are driven by the legislature—for instance, the Energy Conservation Act 2001, Electricity Act 2003, Integrated Energy Policy 2006, National Mission for Enhanced Energy Efficiency (NMEEE), National Sustainable Habitat Mission, National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture, National Solar Mission and so on. Further, Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) and the Smart Cities Mission encompass the provision of affordable energy-efficient housing and low-carbon transport, which embody the SDG 7 targets.

The Energy Conservation Act, 2001 provides an umbrella framework that offers the benefits of energy savings and energy efficiency, as it substantiates the legal, institutional and regulatory framework at the Center and State levels for energy efficiency.⁴⁶ At the state levels, state energy conservation funds are to be constituted to promote energy efficiency and meet the related expenditures. Similarly, the Electricity Act 2003 also provided for the establishment of a district-level committee for promoting energy efficiency and conservation.⁴⁷

The National Mission for Enhanced Energy Efficiency (NMEEE), which comes under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), was conceptualized to tackle the environmental concerns of Climate Change by strengthening the energy efficiency market through the creation of a facilitative regulatory and policy regime, and the promotion of innovative and sustainable business models in this sector. Under the NMEEE, four sub-missions are under operation⁴⁸ – 1) Framework for Energy Efficient Economic Development (FEEED) and 2) Energy Efficiency Financing Platform (EEFP), both of which promote fiscal instruments to encourage energy efficiency; 3) Market Transformation for Energy Efficiency (MTEE), which is aimed at speeding up the access to energy-efficient appliances in the designated sectors through novel methods so that the products are affordable; and 4) Perform, Achieve and Trade (PAT), which is a regulatory mechanism aimed at reducing consumption of energy in the energy-intensive industries. PAT is a market-based mechanism which enables trading of the certifications of excess energy savings and thus, enhances cost-effectiveness.

Most schemes in this domain are implemented by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE)⁴⁹ with the aim of reducing the energy intensity of the Indian economy. It promotes the use of energy-efficient processes, devices and systems, innovative financing, preparing curriculum, and mobilizing international cooperation in relation to energy efficiency. Another related organization– the Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL)⁵⁰ enables governments, industries and consumers to effectively manage their energy needs via energy-efficient technologies. The EESL is based on a Pay-as-You-Save (PAYS) model, which eliminates the need for any upfront capital investment by the consumer. The recovery of the investment is through monetized energy savings that are spread over a period of time. Recently, EESL has implemented the UJALA (UnnatJyoti by Affordable LEDs for All) Scheme, which was a strategic programme to enable usage of the LED bulbs and 1) save annually 100 billion kWh of energy, 2) alongside 790 million tonnes of reduction in CO₂ emissions per year and 3) evade capacity generation of nearly 20,000 MW.⁵¹ A few sectoral interventions in India are as follows:

A) Power Generation:

The programmes in India with regard to energy efficiency were also to address the efficiency of the power plants such as the deployment of supercritical and ultra-supercritical technologies and pushing for Coal Beneficiation and Coal Bed Methane.⁵² Additionally, India has also invested in R&D related to the Integrated Gasification Combined Cycle

(IGCC), which are more efficient and have lower emissions in comparison to conventional pulverized coal technology.

B) Buildings:

India accounts for the fastest growth of projected energy consumption in the building sector till 2040. The average energy consumption in the building sector would rise by 2.7 percent per year, between the years 2015 and 2040.⁵³ This is more than double the rise in comparison with the global average rise. The BEE has prescribed the Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBC) in India, and the ECBC compliant buildings are estimated to be 20-30 percent more energy efficient than the conventional buildings. The ECBC specifies the energy efficiency standards for the buildings and their components in terms of lighting, heating ventilation, air condition systems, electrical systems, building envelope, solar water heating and pumping systems.⁵⁴ India has also launched the Voluntary Star Labelling Programmes for buildings which help promote markets for energy efficiency. Similarly, the LED-based home and street lighting programmes, energy-efficient green buildings and rating programmes, solar buildings, and mandatory Standards Labelling Programme were launched to promote energy efficiency.⁵⁵ In this regard, the National Building Code of India (NBC) would act as the model code for adoption involved in the construction of the buildings, and revisions have been made in this, with respect to ventilation requirements, daylight integration, electrical standards, Heating, Ventilation & Air Conditioning (HVAC) designs etc. Under the existing ratings of GRIHA (Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment) - tools to evaluate the performance of buildings, the municipal corporations offer tax discounts when buildings comply with certain requirements.

C) Transportation:

The BEE has issued the Passenger Car Vehicle (PCV) Standards for fuel efficiency. To reduce the average fuel consumption, it has been prescribed that the manufacturers should continuously reduce the fuel requirements of the cars (by enforcement of medium and long term fuel efficiency standards) and should undertake labelling of the cars with regard to fuel consumption.⁵⁶ Adoption of the Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) operated vehicles and development of metro railways, as well as promoting other public transport facilities, and non-motorized transport under the National Urban Transport Policy (2006) are some of the measures undertaken. Further, India is also pushing for the inland waterway (National Waterways), building

dedicated freight corridors, promoting hybrid and electric vehicles through the mobility programmes such as the National Mission on Electric Mobility (2011), National Electric Mobility Mission Plan (NEMMP) 2020, and Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid &) Electric Vehicles (FAME India) Scheme.⁵⁷

D) Industry:

The industrial sector accounts for 40 percent of the total energy consumption in India.⁵⁸ BEE launched the Perform, Achieve and Trade (PAT) under the National Mission for Enhanced Energy Efficiency (NMEEE) in NAPCC, to reduce the energy consumption and increase efficiency by creating a market-based mechanism where the certification of excess energy saved (ESCerts) can be traded in the market.⁵⁹ For the Micro, Small and Medium Scale Industries (MSMEs), energy-efficient technologies are promoted by a scheme on Technology and Quality Upgradation Support to MSMEs (TEQUP). Further, a platform called Small and Medium Enterprises Energy Efficiency and Knowledge Sharing (SAMEEKSHA) was created, where various stakeholders can pool their knowledge and promote energy efficiency in the MSMEs.⁶⁰

Conclusion: Renewable and the Future

The first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in the renewable energy sector, signed in 2003, pursued cooperation in the areas of wind, small hydro-power and other areas of renewable energy through information networking, sharing of expertise and joint research.⁶¹ Furthermore, in the year 2015, India and China issued a joint statement when the Indian Prime Minister Modi visited China and met the Premier of PRC, Li Keqiang, which depicted cooperation in the renewable energy domain. Through the means of the statement, both the countries agreed to enhance clean energy operations, Electric Vehicles and low-carbon technologies. In addition to that, the launch of the 'South-South Cooperation Climate Fund' and the addition of USD 3.1 billion to the fund have been made by Chinese President Xi Jinping.⁶²

The major sectors where the urban areas in both the countries can undertake renewable energy pursuits include:⁶³ Buildings, Transport, and creating smart integrated Urban Energy Systems. The scope of renewable energy within these areas are to be achieved by 1) installing decentralized solar thermal systems, district heating and cooling networks, solar cooling systems, modern cooking stoves that use

bioenergy or electricity generated by renewables in the buildings sector; 2) biofuels, electric mobility, hydrogen-powered vehicles in the transportation sector; and lastly 3) creating integrated systems of transport and power, heat and power, and smart grids. Further, as cities also generate huge amounts of waste, waste-to-energy and excess industrial by-products can also offer the potential for renewable energy generation.

China perceives renewable energy as a form of energy security that serves as a core of its energy transition. Therefore, it has been trying to increase the share of renewable energy in its energy mix, with 36.6 percent renewable sources of its total installed electric power capacity and 26.4 percent of its total power generation in the year 2017.⁶⁴ Furthermore, as per the Energy Production and Consumption Revolution Strategy (2016-2030), the country aims to meet half of its total electric power generation through non-fossils which include nuclear resources apart from other renewable sources by 2030.⁶⁵ On a similar path, India has set its renewable energy target of installing 175 GW of renewable energy capacity by the year 2022, of which solar power accounts for 100 GW, wind energy of 60 GW, bio-power of 10 GW and small hydro-power of 5 GW. Moreover, in order to develop its solar energy sector, India has initiated the International Solar Alliance (ISA).⁶⁶ Henceforth, the recent steps towards development in the renewable energy sector taken by India and China together, have played a crucial role in leading the global energy transition towards renewable from the past few years.

In both India and China, the essential aspects for energy efficiency include energy security and climate change, for which renewable energy forms a crucial catalyst. As the Sustainable DG 7 also incorporates renewable energy as one of its core targets, there needs to be a significant rise in the use of renewable energy such as solar, wind, hydro, tidal, geothermal and biomass energy. The adoption of renewable energy provides numerous advantages, which include that the resource would be clean, affordable, sustainable, resilient against external shocks, and would provide millions of jobs as well as significant economic opportunities. Doubling the share of renewable in the energy mix can lift the global economy by up to USD 1.3 trillion.⁶⁷

Considering that both India and China are energy-starved, energy efficiency is crucial for reaching their emission reduction goals while catering to the growing economy. However, both countries continue to face similar challenges while trying to maximize the effectiveness of the related policies. The countries aim to make the investments in the

energy sector effective, without having only marginal improvements to avoid “technology lock-ins.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, countries like India and China have an imperative part to play to reduce the energy consumed by buildings owing to their rising global share. Similarly, the transportation sector requires a modal shift towards public transport, behavioural changes, technological innovations, smaller and lighter cars, fuel-efficient combustion engines, and zero-emission electric vehicles for a sustainable transition.⁶⁹

The availability of cheaper and competitive technology from China alongside the existence of huge input and product markets in India would act as perfect complementarities that would enable both the countries to cooperate on these lines – where India’s renewable energy sector is projected to offer \$30 billion⁷⁰ every year, and China has an opportunity to become a major investor in this sector. The Business & Sustainable Development Commission’s Report 2017 identifies 17 business opportunities associated with energy challenges and estimates their aggregate potential value in 2030 at USD 4.3 trillion, at current prices.⁷¹

India’s non-participation in China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) which has huge potential for reframing global energy cooperation, is not expected to hinder alliances between the two countries. As countries included among the world’s top oil importers, India and China have often collectively bargained for better prices in the global oil market. Both countries also have a substantial role to play for energy cooperation on multilateral platforms such as the BRICS and G20 Global Energy Governance agenda. The Sino-Indian partnerships should be guided by the establishment of energy research, forums for dialogue between concerned stakeholders, expertise, technology and know-how transfers, establishing information networks, and providing a scope for regular progress reviews. Collaboration in the renewable energy sector should help both nations to address the energy security issues and achieve the carbon emission targets alongside the achievement of various development goals associated with SDG 7.

The rates of urbanization in the global context and particularly for the nations of India and China present challenges as well as opportunities. The difficulties before both nations are to secure resources and meet the growing energy demands. In the current scenario, the COVID-19 pandemic further poses humongous short-to-medium-term challenges such as – unprecedented volatilities in oil prices, diplomatic tension between nations and stalled energy projects. On the other hand, the

opportunities that the countries should focus on in the longer horizon include- the empowerment of communities, ensuring social and economic equity and addressing the existing environmental challenges.

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Questions of Identity: Reconsidering Narratives of Indian Migrants in Myanmar

By

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Abstract

The odyssey of Indian trading enterprise, coupled with questions of agreement throughout the Asian countries is crammed in historical sources since time immemorial. It is with the spurring of the Indian freedom struggle, particularly from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, that many Indians migrated to Burma (presently Myanmar) for varied reasons. Events such as the tracheotomy of successive Anglo-Burmese Wars elevated the bustling of immigrants to Myanmar, which accentuated the ballooning of potent cultural, social and political allegiance between the two countries. This cross-border migration politics involved questions of identity and issues of displacement, still prevalent in the current political and historical context. This paper is an attempt to decipher episodes triggering the magnanimous migration of Indians to erstwhile Burma and stories of repatriation, looking into the interplay of historical narratives and personal accounts of the immigrants collected via eloquent observation.

Keywords: Cross-border Migration, Myanmar, Stories of Repatriation, Historical Narratives.

Historical Narrative: Overview

In order to configure the pattern of migration to Burma, it is a pre-requisite to revisit the fashion of migration during the British Era, thus analyzing the groundwork for the construction of the concerns pertaining to the identity of the migrants, and validate the findings.

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There were consequently three successive waves during the British period that facilitated the bustling of people across the border. The first Anglo Burmese War fought during 1821-25 was a rudimentary phase of development in Burma, during which the British government annexed the Rakhine and Tanithiya regions. This was mostly in order to access the developing opportunities at the last colony. The Second Anglo- Burmese War fought in 1852 led to the annexation of Lower Burma followed, by a rise in Indian immigration. Indians were accommodated in administrative and military services. This flow also proved symbolic towards initiating settlement with an agro-ecological perspective. The Third Anglo Burmese War consequently led to the annexation of Upper Burma. Thus, these two wars fought in successive periods transformed the entire deltaic modelling from a sparsely populated land, to becoming the core of the world's rice production. Moreover, the opening of Suez Canal unfolded the scope for the Western World to acquire the Burmese variety of rice. Thus, people across different periods migrated to access emanating opportunities of distinct kinds, at the behest of the colonial rule.

In general, Indian cross-border emigration often provided a general overview concerning the nature and pattern of population movements. Population shifts were often a result of the abolition of slavery, necessitated by the need for replacement labour. This particular demand was synonymous with the concept of indentured labour, a sort of contract binding an individual for a specific period of service, in lieu of payment for the passage.¹ Such a movement directed towards British, French and Dutch colonies and these allocated in the innumerable rubber and tea plantations located in the South East Asian region.² As this section of the migrants settled down in colonies, they facilitated the movement of similar others, whose numbers began to expand at a substantial rate. It was only with respect to this economic milieu that the British officials envisaged the newly formed colonies of Burma as a conquest of fertile tracts.

After the Third Burmese War, there had been a series of international events which had been interweaved with the question of migrant lives in Burma. The First World War kindled feelings of nationalism among the Burmese, closely connected with a political consciousness. "In 1917, the British government promised 'responsible self-government through the gradual development of self-governing institutions' in India through the Montague-Chelmsford Committee that was appointed to devise the means for implementing this declaration. However, this declaration did not visit Burma; their report stated that 'the desire for elective institutions has not developed in Burma'.³ The

World Wars necessitated the separation of the administration of Burma from India. It maneuvered several opportunities for gaining concessions towards autonomy for the Burmese support of hostilities. The British government brought about far-reaching changes in the country's socio-economic makeup, and this is where one should place the trajectory of the waves of migration that followed across the Indo-Burma border.

Migratory Patterns and Socio- Cultural

As discussed in the preceding section of the paper, there were some substantial components assumed as governing connotations to evaluate the nature of the movement of people from one country to another. Studies on migration have analyzed various aspects that are seemingly analogous to migration – most importantly, how migration affects geographical spaces and how it brings forth transformation in social structures.⁴ Migration involves questions of the identity transformation of immigrants, more so, for the Indian Diaspora who have moved across the country. However, in this paper, I would also take into consideration compromises made by the repatriates, the socio-cultural identity transformations and the related identity strains while trying to understanding the very concept of 'homeland'.

The Second Anglo Burmese War created prospects for the blooming of agriculture, and that in turn, witnessed a major wave of immigration. Trade also prospered along with systematic expansion of agriculture. Initially, it was evident that the needs of the labour were in huge amounts, and were met by migrant labours from North Burma. However, with the accelerated demand of rice cultivation, this existing labour proved minuscule.⁵ Meanwhile, the Labour Act was passed in 1870 when Recruiting Agents were appointed in India and subsidies were given to the shipping companies for transporting Indian immigrants to Burma. This guaranteed the stimulating efforts of the British officials, considering Burma in the context of an economic blot that was conjectural, they sought for Indian cheap labour to multiply potential returns. In 1885, the British conquered the entirety of Burma, thus paving the way for exponential growth in Indian immigration to Burma. Further, "the Famine Commission of India reviewed the position and recommended that Indians from the congested atmosphere of India should be encouraged to migrate to Burma for the development of wasted and unproductive lands, but that such an effort should be left to private enterprises".⁶ These factors saw a huge influx in the migrant population to Burma.

A continuous effort on part of the British government in view to promote cheap labour in Burma could be seen with the inauguration of steamer services which operated on a weekly/fortnightly basis from the Coromandel coast for the smooth transition of the labour force.⁷ This validates for the migration of Tamils, particularly the 'Chettiars' who had been to Burma. The shipping companies also reduced the fares to regulate the increased traffic. Rangoon showed the highest proportion of Indian migrants.⁸ The colonial rule in Burma established closer historical links with Bengal in terms of political, economic, commercial reasons. The route from Chittagong to Akyab and parts of Arakan were well-connected through the roads established. According to the 1901 Census, Akyab had the highest figure, with Indians (for the most part Bengalis) forming each 10,000 of the population.⁹ The exclusive ledger of Bengalis collected through field work, extensively describes their ancestors having travelled from parts of Chittagong, Dhaka and Noakhali. An array of Indian professionals including moneylenders, coolies, administrators, military, security forces, educationist and the likes dominated British Burma. It is important to analyze the ethnic ties of the Indian migrants who moved to Burma, their place of origin and their experiences in a foreign land, more particularly, how they affected the social and economic structures of the country.

If one considers the period between 1900-1938, denoted as a high phase of mobility, a total strength of 1,15,1500 Indian immigrants went to Burma. A question that however surfaced was, that who were these migrants and which regions did they come from. The archival data classifies these Indian migrants broadly on ethnic affiliations—mostly seen as Bengalis, Chittagonian, Hindustani, Oriya, Tamil, Telegu and others.¹⁰ Whilst there had been seasonal immigration, mostly to secure fortune, some travelled with the intent to settle in the distant land permanently. The majority of Indian immigrants were unskilled laborers and they came to Burma because of certain misfortunes fuelled by economic pressure in India such as, a bad harvest in Madras.¹¹

All communities played a substantial role in shaping the social structure of Burma. In this regard, I would look into the various aspects that would offer a vivid understanding from the documentation collected during the field work. Suprakash Chowdhury, one of the respondents, offers a narration of the circumstances that led to the migration of his family from Kolkata. His family moved after independence while his paternal and maternal grandparents were rooted in Burma. Himself being a teacher (Late Sushanta Bikash

Chowdhury), there was a strong desire in his father, guided by the philosophical urge to apply knowledge in beneficial ways, and 'build the nation'.¹² His father was a graduate at the City College, Calcutta and travelled to Burma as a school teacher at the Bengal Academy, as a yearning to promote the Bengali language. When Mr. Suprakash Chaudhury was born, his father took up a job at the Vivekananda institution, with a keen interest in expanding the activities of the Bengali Association- a centre where Bengali culture thrived in Burma.

Thus, India and Burma both aimed to provide literacy to the middle-class, particularly in terms of higher education. One can encounter a significant representation of the "Indian" lineage actualized through the promotion of vernacular language amidst the local variant. Various similar instances came to be unveiled during the field work conducted in Myanmar as well. In 1894, Brajesh Kumar Verma, presently a resident of Myanmar, recalls how his great grandfather first came in 1894 from Arrah Zila (Bihar) as a field labourer who primarily grew sugar and paddy.¹³ However, having been exposed to the modern facilities of education, he completed his Bachelors in Mathematics from the Arts and Science University in Yangon. He informs us how "there has been an enthusiasm on part of the Hindi speaking people to keep the native language in use, actualized through the production of literature in an organization named 'Sahitya Sammelan Prayag' in Rangoon".¹⁴ A strong commitment towards the preservation of vernacular literature is sustained through the presence of bodies like the Myanmar Hindi Literary Society, where Mr. Verma himself, is the General Secretary. Mr. Verma also completed a correspondence course in Hindi from the Banaras Hindu University later in his life, and is rigorously involved in producing literature. Despite the colonial rule carefully neglecting the age-old links that existed for centuries between India and Burma, it resonated within the ebb and flow of history. More so, a peculiar feature has been the urge of people to create an intermediate space within the mainstream world, set amidst a perpetual tension of a distant cultural and linguistic world. Besides, the unstable administrative structures and political uncertainties in the mid-nineteenth-century prompted British administrators to try to centralize the bureaucracies of Bengal and Burma, and thus Judson College and Rangoon College were affiliated with the University of Calcutta.¹⁵ The respondent reiterated this fact as well. Another respondent informed how India was the destination where he was accorded with his higher education, receiving his Master's and Doctorate in Philosophy Degrees from Bombay University.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the world order started changing rapidly. The Great Depression of the 1930s coupled with its economic consequences engendered social issues like the spawning of localized sectarian violence, and furthered anti-Indian riots. Race riots took place between the Indians and the Burmese, and a manifesto came into effect on May 30, 1930 propounding the boycott of Indian shops. There were riots that warped the social fabric of the Rangoon city meanwhile during 1938, "For the first time in the 1930s significant number of Indians left Burma for political reasons contributing to the 10 percent decline registered between the 1931 and 1941 census".¹⁷ Burma was administratively separated from India as the Government of Burma Act came into force on 1st April, 1937. This instability prompted a brief repatriation of the Chettiers, particularly the assets they held, to Madras during the late 1930s.

This paper combines the narratives of repatriates and the diaspora, coalesced with historical facts, to better understand their socio-economic roles. The Bengalis were time and again, transported overseas via the Calcutta port, and a section travelled through the inland route or the Chittagong port. The ones who came from Calcutta comprised of educated men mostly deployed in a subordinate capacity in the railways or local fund services, or in mercantile offices like clerks, and some were even shopkeepers and traders.¹⁸ One of the respondents, Rina Nag, informed that her father served as an engineer in a British engineering company, Clark and Grey and also later worked in the embassy performing various ministerial duties.¹⁹ The Indian freedom struggle also played a role in generating a massive migration of Indians, particularly local Bengali men to Burma, an aspect seldom covered in the existing literature on migration. International affairs increasingly contributed to migration patterns, though inherently political. Japan's occupation of Burma in 1942 induced conditions for a great exodus of Indian communities to Burma. Subhash Chandra Bose shifted the headquarters of the 'Provisional Government of Free India' and the Indian National Army (INA) from Singapore to Rangoon.²⁰ This stimulated the need for recruiting Indian men for voluntary services in the national struggle and subsequently, the INA bank was set up to raise donations from the Indian community. Swapan Kumar Nandi elucidates his father's participation in the national struggle prompted the latter's movement to Burma. Formerly a resident of Chittagong (then undivided Bengal), his father joined Azad Hind Fauj.²¹ He marched through the jungles of North-Western Burma. Nandi's paternal grandfather, Late Surendranath Ghosh, had also played an active part in the freedom struggle, justified by his connection to the INA. An increased mobilization of women in the national freedom

struggle, menaced the conventional way of life, exemplified by the role played by Nandi's mother, when she was recruited in INA's Rani Jhansi Regiment.²² Another interviewee, Smt. Maya Chakroborty, informs us that her "sister also contributed to the Jhansi Rani regime, while her uncle served in the INA. However, during his service in Imphal, Netaji sent him back because of his injury."²³ With steady support from the Japanese army, the INA prepared for an attack to quell the British troops, and much so by relying on the Indian men. It succeeded in capturing some territories in India in March 1944, before suffering defeat at the hands of the British.²⁴ However, after this skirmish, the chances for freedom looked obscure. Mrs. Chakroborty also narrates the events that followed during the face off- "how their old house has been turned into shambles, to which they could never return. During the war, they moved to the districts. She vividly describes that the wooden house behind theirs was burnt and how the Japanese lent their support for restoration. They admired Bose, and his ideals generated huge support among fellow Indians. The British had allegedly thrown bombs at local houses during serious rioting in Burma."²⁵ Though they had returned to Rangoon, they inhabited a rented house for a considerable period of time after finding out that their old house had succumbed to the cataclysm of war.

The early twentieth century witnessed around 1,00,000 such people arriving at Burma from India. They engaged in multiple activities like running businesses, working in paddy cultivation, staffing in railways and custom offices, trading in rice and sugar mills, dealing in the timber trade and so on. The migrants primarily included a community of Tamils, precisely known as the 'Chettiars' from South India. The role played by the Chettiars has more often than not, been undermined throughout the course of history by being narrowed down as predacious 'moneylenders', but they cannot be brought down under the strict categorization of the term.²⁶ Their role was many layers, which nonetheless contributed to Burma's economic welfare, connected particularly with the country's advancement in agriculture. They provided capital to Burmese cultivators throughout much of the colonial period, charging minimum interest rates in comparison to their indigenous counterparts.²⁷ Though they tried to avoid contestation with local power structure, they were eventually expelled from Burma, losing land and properties in the process, as the British rule underwent several changes. "Majority of Tamils migrated from the Madras Presidency like Ramnad and Tanjore. The Government clerical works and mercantile offices mostly recruited middle-class Tamils, whereas, the lower-middle as well as the lower classes were made to work in the rice mills, and as agricultural workers. Chettiars came from

Chettinad in Madras.”²⁸ N. Marimuthu recalls that his grandparents had migrated during the colonial era, mostly to serve as labour in the agricultural fields. Tamils as a community were engaged in the rubber plantations and also worked in rice fields. With unperturbed enthusiasm, he narrates the role played by the Tamil Chettians. “The Chettians owned the lands and allowed Tamil people to work there at the onset of British rule. However, after the World War, their numbers had declined as presumably some left.”²⁹ The phenomenon spoken of, can be set in the context of the implementation of the Burma Land and Revenue Act of 1876, that ushered in significant changes. The final Anglo-Burmese War saw the creation of ‘peasant proprietors’, who would be the basis for generating land revenue to keep the state apparatus functioning. Under the Burma Land Act, the occupiers of land acquired the ownership of land via their occupation and the payment of twelve successive years of land revenue on it.³⁰ By 1880, the Chettians had fanned out through Burma and by the end of the century they had become by far ‘the most important factor in the agricultural credit structure of Lower Burma.’³¹ It is mostly this class that revived the flow of capital and labour to the colonies. The Tamils came to work in the paddy field back then, adds Mr. Munusamy.³² While most respondents inform us that their grandparents travelled mostly to work in the fields, one also shares a story of discomfort stemming from food scarcity in the native land, when his grandparents reached Myanmar in search of work. Besides, the capital networking system, the Nattukottai Chettians played contentious roles. M.A. Vallaswami Vellar, presently based in the Kumayut Township of Myanmar, vividly remembers about his grandfather’s arrival to Rangoon, which dates back to the early twentieth century, most probably in the 1920s. “The Nattukottai Chettians invited my grandfather to look after the temple which was situated in Moulmein, around the Thaton area. Narayana Chettiar, who was the then Chairman of the Congress party, invited my grandfather to come here’.³³ The Indian labour, particularly the ones from South India, formed an important part of the Burmese socio-economic milieu. There was a population influx that has been enumerated well in the Census Report of 1931. Burmese development had a profound influence on the Telegu Coastal districts, and the presence of 3,000,00 Madrasis in Burma at the time of the Census, is an indication of the importance of the movement.³⁴

Another section, originally hailing from regions of Andhra Pradesh region, belong to Telegu community. They could also be identified as repatriates from Burma, but are now distinctly settled in the fringes of the Kolkata and the Andhra belt. They migrated from the Coromandel

ports, namely- Coconada, Vishakhapatnam, Bimlipatam, Calingapatam, Barua and Gopalpur, mostly belonging to the Ganjam, Godavari and Vishakhapatnam regions of Andhra.³⁵ N.Ramesh, a first generation Burmese returnee, recalls that his father travelled from Burma in the year 1942, after working in the State Bank of India's Rangoon branch, in a clerical post. However, the latter was transferred and here settled them back in India. Though Yaramasetty Munna³⁶ hardly remembers of the happenings that led to his grandparents' migration to Burma, he vividly narrates his father's occupation in the police force. In this regard, he describes his part of the city where he stayed. They lived in a quarter provided in lieu of his father's job. It was a police camp of sorts, houses built with wood, typically with fence panels of timber.³⁷ Mr. Munna's wife, Beena Yaramasetty, born in Burma, informs us that her father had served the British, enabling them to regulate a quarter. Her father served in the Matches Company at Rangoon that gives us a vivid idea of the Indian overseas migration to Burma generating under varying circumstances over the past decades. There were regional disparities considering the number of migrants travelling, though commuting was predominantly labor-oriented, one could not be reduced to fixed categories of work and labour. In addition, female migration was also a key factor, which should not be undermined of certain anecdotes that has been provided in the preceding pages.

Identity Issue and Complexities

Though the Indian migrants played a substantial socio-economic role in Myanmar, they however, developed a cultural milieu characterized by "Indianness" in the distant land. The diaspora's identity was entrenched somewhere between the plural structure of their 'Indian' origin shaped much by the variations of the host community.³⁸ There is little assimilation that one could contemplate on, as we see in the case of Indian immigrants with the rest of the Burmese community. As it appears from various official reports, the Burmans often referred to the Indians as 'kala', the etymology of which is not clear, generally a colloquial term, 'Ka La' is used to designate a foreigner or one who has travelled from the overseas.³⁹ Patterns of conventional insinuations inflicted against a particular community gives a clear picture regarding how things did unfold in the host country. One needs to look at the cultural niche the Indian immigrants built for themselves, as a mechanism of existence in a *mélange* of different cultures. One such 'alternative' space for the Indians is the Durga Bari at Myanmar⁴⁰, etched in the memory of migrants and still continues to hold an important place for the diaspora community. Besides hosting the

Durga Puja with great pomp and grandeur, Durga Bari witnesses all kind of major Hindu festivals and houses multiple deities comprising of Saraswati, Lakshmi, Ganesh, Shiva, Manasa and the like.⁴¹ Nihar Ranjan Chakraborty, the chief priest at the Durga Bari, elucidates on his service and association with the Durga Bari for fifty-two years now. His father served as an engineer in the Rangoon Corporation. "I was associated with Ramakrishna Mission but later on shifted here. We observe every kind of Indian festival here, along with Buddha Purnima. We even got married in this temple."⁴² The temple is completely inclusive, as Mr. Chakraborty informs us. Thus, the Bengali diaspora maintains their 'Indian' roots or religio-cultural identity. The field work also unveiled that the Durga Bari hosted all Bengali marriages, symbolizing Indian tradition.

An interesting feature noticed as a practice among the Indian diaspora in Myanmar, is the use of alternative Burmese names to find wider acceptance in the society. There are several such instances. Raj Mondal, a present generation member of the Bengali community uses Waiyenn Kyaw as his official name, while Perahalathan, a Tamil, identifies as Kyaw Aye officially. However, the urge to maintain the Indianness among the Burmese has dwindled over time, particularly as is noticed among the present generation. Raj Mondal, presently twenty years of age, seems to assimilate himself in the Burmese cultural space prudently, and is unable to speak his native language. The diaspora is being subjected to the withering away of their 'Indian' characteristics slowly while integrating themselves in the cultural space of the host country. One respondent, Mr. Promod Chandra Nat notifies, "My daughter usually speaks in Burmese, though they know Bengali. We use Bengali to communicate".⁴³ Thus, there are several overlapping facets which make it difficult to understand the diaspora identity.

There also resides a sense of belongingness to the 'motherland' beyond the borders of the country.⁴⁴ However, the implications may vary. They sought to refashion a version of the homeland in their memory, similar to 'little India'. Such an idea is manifested in a Tamil Temple, such as the Shri Mariamman Temple (Ochin) serving as sites of memory for the Tamil Diaspora. M. A. Vellaswami Vellar, the head priest of the Shri Mariamman Temple, informs us of the various festivals like Shivaratri, Navaratri, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Krishna Jayanti that are observed with all pomp and glory in the temple.⁴⁵ He is also a member of the Acharya Sangam Pujari Association in Myanmar. Another resident of the Tamil community, Mr. R.V. Ganesh, who is a member of the above-mentioned temple, is associated with the Hindu Central Board, an organization whose prime role is to regulate various festivals pertaining to different

communities like the Oriya, Marwari, Gorkha, Nepali and the like.⁴⁶ Several others are members of the Myanmar Tamil- Hindu Association.⁴⁷ Thus, they have constructed an imaginary space in the distant land, with deep historic roots embedded in Tamil culture. Moreover, though apparently one can get an essence of a cosmopolitan culture that exists in Myanmar, however amidst this diversity, the recreation of an identity is not confined to a particular geographical space confined to the host land.

Quite similarly for the repatriates in Burmese settlements in various parts of India, also often being termed as 'Burma colonies'⁴⁸, undergoes a distinct identity formation settled amidst the dichotomous category of host/homeland dynamics. Rina Nag, who was born and stayed in Burma for almost seventeen years, gladly reveals how she would love to cling on to the Burmese identity.⁴⁹ She comments on her affiliation towards the native land by saying that "I still miss the country, and I do cook Burmese food like Khaw Suey and Balachaung. When I was returning, I thought I would get a re-entry visa during the democratic government's time. Burma is closer to me than this country".⁵⁰ Thus, one can obviously gauge the sense of belonging to the host country. With regard to the Indians repatriated back during the post-colonial era, they were mostly cases of forced migration taking place during the onset of military rule of General Ne Win, during the 1960s. A sudden paranoia got injected among the Burmese Indian communities, and a subsequent threat to their indigenous existence was found following the nationalization programmes of the land. The nationalization of Burmese education, services and other spheres also affected Indians proportionately, as recollected by Mr. Swapan Kumar Nandi, who further recapitulates how his guardians were terrified at the replacement of Bengali language, which prompted the family's decision to return back to India.⁵¹ The opportunity for work was also at stake, adds Sobha Devi Guha, who currently resides in the Barasat 'Burma' colony, after having spent a considerable number of years in Burma.

The 1960s and the 1970s saw a majority of Burmese Indian repatriates arriving in eastern India, particularly in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal while some also arrived in the south including Tamil Nadu and Madras. These inter-country variations play an important role in shaping identities of the returnees. It is the reason why 'diasporic homecoming is often fraught with the problems of reintegration ...as (they) land up being strangers or minority groups in the same land which becomes the earlier host land'.⁵² One respondent from Moreh briefs about his initial days after his return from Burma. Abdul Gafar, 69 years, recalls of his childhood and expresses his grief

by saying "When I was fifteen years, there was a government undertaking in Burma, and we had to come back. In 1964, Lal Bahadur Shahtri helped the Indians to return back.... we reached at a transit camp built by the Tamil Nadu Government at Sholavaram, and stayed there for a month. I remember people dying out of starvation. However, the government gave us a fifteen hundred rupee loan to find a job and sustain ourselves. However, we travelled back to Manipur in the hope of travelling back to Burma, but border forces would restrict us. Hence, we came to Moreh to eventually relocate back, and have been staying for over fifty-four years now. Though, I managed to set up a small stall selling betel leaves, along with my father, we often face discrimination from the Tamil natives who often use terms like "Burma people", hurled accusations and often misbehaved".⁵³ Thus, the process of identity construction for the returnees, has been a complex one, punctuated with a paradigmatic shift from their host country and an urge to develop similar socio-geographic spaces "in exile".

Conclusion

As could be analyzed from the preceding section, there have been a pool of factors that have prompted the migration of Indians to Myanmar. A diverse section of the diaspora community with sets of ingrained pluralistic ideas and a belief system, shaped their identity patterns and consciousness. Though majority tried to maintain their "Indianness" while partaking in the socio-economic affairs of the host country, this notion of possessing a strong 'homeland' consciousness is fast disappearing with a complete breakdown in the network of the latter. Gradually, there evolved a set of subcultures fashioned with a distinct form of identity and consciousness in a contrasting social setup, making the understanding of identity formulation a complex, and a multilayered domain.

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Laos in the Cold War: The Politics of Escalation till Geneva Accord

By

Patit Paban Mishra *

Abstract

With the backdrop of the ever-convoluted cold war rivalry, lay dormant within Laos the capability of transforming into a zone of contention. With the involvement of external agencies as patrons, local politics began being directly associated with the international complications, further culminating into a national crisis. The only requisition was hue and cry for rapprochement. This essay shall attempt to delve deeper into the root causes of this predicament, finally harping into the way towards the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Keywords: Lao, Cold War, Crisis.

Introduction

The land locked and underdeveloped country of Laos presents a narrative of scenarios in the early 1960s that almost brought the world on the verge of an extensive warfare. The episodes of crisis in Laos generated a peripheral outlook, when collated with contemporaneous events such as the Berlin War Crisis and Cuban Missile War. This gained momentum subsequently after the spiraling of dissensions in Vietnam, instantly when Laos became an adjunct of the Vietnamese imbroglio. Laos was adorned into a combat zone ensuing the clash of both the superpowers, the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), stimulating further

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catastrophe in the ambit of international politics. The present paper would traverse into the ramification of quandaries occurring in Laos in the backdrop of cold war. It would analyze factors that are held responsible for the intensification of such crisis and diminishing it afterwards. The role of superpowers, great powers, and regional powers shall be deliberated, bearing in mind their interests and motivations. This called for an instant estimation of reflections and retaliations of the local actors to the continuing crisis. The internationalization of the crisis, especially for its association with the Vietnam War, exasperated a hornet's nest in Laos from 1960s. This obstructed the spate of solution to usher in and uplift Laos from the futility, it had been thrown into.

A Brief History

During World War II, the Japanese took control over Laos and declared its independence from the French colonial rule on March 9, 1945. The renouncing of the Japanese paramountcy invigorated Phetsarat (1890-1905) to institute the independent *Lao Issara* (Free Laos) Government on September 1. It prompted the opening up of new horizons for the Lao elite to chart out the course of independence. The fate of *Lao Issara* was a transitory one as the French began to re-conquer its colonial Empire of Indochina hereafter. The First Indochina War (1946-1954) broke out in Laos and the country gained limited independence by the French on July 19, 1949. The political groups beheld the developments in Laos in a dissimilar way. The three major strands in Laos; Pathet Lao, neutralists and the rightists became a constant feature of Lao politics afterwards. The Pathet Lao (Land of Lao) vociferously opposed the French move, whereas Souvanna Phouma (1901-1984) expressed affiliation to the new RLG Government, commissioned in February 1950. The term Pathet Lao is principally used for the Communist movement of Laos that commenced in 1945 and this uninterrupted wave of communism went brimming until 1975, when whole of Laos became Communist. It bore the hostilities along with the Viet Minh and Khmer Rouge in the First Indochina War against the French. The three communist factions of Indochina had formed the Viet-Khmer-Lao alliance on 11 March 1951. The collapse of Dien Bien Phu on 7 May, 1954 ended the French colonial rule in Indochina and the next day, the Indochinese session of the Geneva Conference began. The Pathet Lao gained recognition as a political party with control over Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces. It began to consolidate its position by revamping its organizational structure and partaking in coalition Governments. The Geneva Conference of 1954 had not solved the problem. There was formation of national union Government after the

signing of the Vientiane Agreements of 1956-1957 between the Pathet Lao and RLG. But the politics of the country turned towards extreme right. In December 1959, the military dominated Government of General Phoumi Nosavan (1920-1985) arrested the Pathet Lao members of the National Assembly. Laos was heading towards a crisis point in the context of cold war. Peace became illusive and Laos was plunged into civil war in 1960s.

The Extraneous Power -Play

The situation of antipathy in Laos had further amplified due to the involvement of external powers. There were different viewpoints endorsed by the actors regarding the ballgame of Laos.

The cataclysm in Laos intensified and depleted, constructed upon the whims of the superpowers, august powers and the neighboring countries. The USA and the then North Vietnam were major actors in the diegesis of Lao, developing a patron-client relationship with the RLG and the Pathet Lao respectively. The US administration saw the situation as part of communist drive for world domination. Laos was included in the containment strategy as first line of defense against North Vietnam and China. The American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles (1888- 1959) had called Laos as “outpost of free world”¹ and said the day after Geneva Conference began:

Whether this can be stopped at this point, and whether Laos, Cambodia and southern part of Vietnam, Thailand, Malaya, and Indonesia can be kept out of Communist control depends very much on whether we can build a dike around the present loss.²

Another factor in the involvement of Laos had been Thailand, which was judging the American commitment to it by the steps that Washington was taking against spread of Communism in Laos.³ The US supported the leaders of Laos, who would best serve its interest. It strengthened the RLG by massive military and economic aid. Laos became the only country of the world, whose military budget witnessed reinforcement by the US cent percent. A special Protocol exposed Laos to be sheltered by the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) of September 6, 1954. The terms of the Geneva agreements had restricted, the Military Advisory Assistance Group to be operational in Laos and therefore in response, a Program Evaluation Office (PEO) was established. It was a military mission staffed by the US armed forces, marked by the provisional elimination of its military ranks.⁴ The PEO had been the custodian of Royal Lao Army (RLA), which was receiving the eighty percent of total American aid to Laos. It

was the State Department, advocating support to the RLA's entire military budget and the Joint Chiefs of Staff propounded those military considerations lacked much value.⁵ The ongoing crisis of Laos, would unfold afterwards the ambiguity in the decision of the different departments of the US administration regarding the policy that to be followed. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped in formation of a rightist grouping, Committee for Defense of National Interests (CDNI) on June 17, 1958.⁶ Its aim was combating communism in Laos and the CIA backed the rightist politician, General Phoumi. The CIA advisor John Hazey was very close to him.⁷ The State Department was supporting Phoui Sananikone (1903-1983), the Premier of Laos. But the CIA found Phoumi more pliable and it along with the PEO advised him to stage a coup. He also stage managed the elections of April 1960, and the CIA agents were distributing money to village chiefs at the time of elections.⁸ The cooperation between the Governments of US, Laos and Thailand to land locked Laos and the US had built three new airfields in north-eastern Thailand. Both Laos and Thailand were maintaining close economic and military cooperation under the auspices of SEATO. The US was encouraging to develop close relations between Vientiane and Bangkok. Transport and communication facilities improved between two, which was a part of the US sponsored communication network in Laos, Thailand and South Vietnam. The US also built up the clandestine army (*Armee Clandestine*, AC) consisting of the Hmong (Meo) tribals and mercenaries from Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and the Philippines. Thailand became a rear base for the American policy of containment in communism.

Laos was strategically vital to North Vietnam. The close collaboration between communist factions of the three Indochinese states began with the formation of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930. The leader of the Pathet Lao, Prince Souphanouvong (1901-1995) had met the Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) in 1945 and gained control of central Laos with the help of Vietnamese troops.⁹ The Prince along with leaders like Kaysone Phomvihane (1920-1992), Phoumi Vongvichit (1909-1994), Nouhak Phoumasavan (1914-) etc. had nurtured the Communist movement. Souphanouvong proclaimed the parallel Government of Pathet Lao along with its political organ, *Neo Lao Issara* (Lao Free Front) in August, 1950.¹⁰ The objective of Hanoi was the unification of Vietnam and it was after the Geneva Conference of 1954 that Ho Chi Minh proclaimed of attaining the objective.¹¹ The northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua, controlled by the Pathet Lao were of immense help as agents and there was a thrive to send them to South Vietnam through these areas. The mountain terrain adjoining these provinces of Laos and North Vietnam

were suitable for guerilla warfare also. North Vietnam reacted sharply to the formation of SEATO and the American aid to South Vietnam. An independent South Vietnam would not have survived without aid from Washington and that country was “essentially the creation of United States”.¹² Hanoi had realized this fact and increased support to the Communist factions of Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam. In December 1960, the National Liberation Front (NLF) of South Vietnam had come into existence and Laos became more closely interlinked in Hanoi’s task for reunification.

Apart from giving material help to the Pathet Lao like supply of arms and training, Hanoi was playing an important role in its organizational structure. The Pathet Lao Army (PLA) was formed with the assistance from North Vietnam. As the war engulfed in Indochina in 1960s and 1970s, the PLA provided a supporting role to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Hanoi had a military mission in each of the Pathet Lao controlled provinces. There was presence of advisors from the NVA in Pathet Lao with six in each battalion, three in a company and two advisors in each platoon.¹³ The North Vietnamese also exerted a strong influence in the *Phak Pasason Lao* (People’s Party of Laos) proclaimed on March 22, 1955.¹⁴ It was renamed next year as the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Modeled closely after the Lao Dong party of North Vietnam, the LPRP also was controlling the broad-based political organization, the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS, Lao Patriotic Front) established on January 6, 1956. Many of the LPRP men had been members of the ICP. Kaysone was the Secretary General of the LPRP, which had a Central Committee of twenty members. In May 1959, Hanoi began to give more aid to the Pathet Lao after a decision by the Lao Dong party. It also began to increase assistance to the NLF and exerted strong influence on it after formation of the People’s Revolutionary Party in January 1962.

The Commencement of the Civil War

From 1960s, Lao crisis escalated, and the country was plunged into a civil war. The 1962 Geneva Accords gave temporary respite to the country. The pattern of escalatory and de-escalatory momentums continued until whole of Laos became Communist in 1975. Events moved fast in Laos after the coup of Captain Kong Lae of Second paratroop battalion on August 9, 1960. He was irked over the rampant corruption and American interference in Laos. The Pathet Lao leader Phoumi Vongvichit welcomed the coup as well as the establishment of a neutralist Government formed by Souvanna Phouma.¹⁵ Both the rightist leaders like Phoumi Nosavan and Boun Oum were opposed to

it. Boun had declared that Souvanna's Government was illegal and charged that it had opened Laos to North Vietnamese aggression.¹⁶

He declared himself the Premier of Laos. The situation in Laos was becoming a three-sided struggle and fighting soon broke out. To the left there was the Pathet Lao; Boun Oum -Phoumi Nosavan faction represented the right and, in the center, stood Souvanna with his neutralist followers. Internal disputes acted as a catalyst in the flickering of, the international feud. The civil war rose to a stature of an internationalized one with each side drawing up inexorable external support. The different branches of the US Government had conflicting policies towards development in Laos. Winthrop G. Brown (1907-1987), the new ambassador to Laos, was supporting Souvanna. J. Graham Parsons (1907-1991), the former ambassador to Vientiane was heading the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. He was persuading Souvanna to break off relations with the Pathet Lao and support Phoumi Nosavan. The American President Dwight David Eisenhower (1890-1969) afterwards wrote that Parsons mission was to break off with the Pathet Lao.¹⁷ In October 1960, both the State and Defense Departments decided that Souvanna should go and suspended American aid to Laos.¹⁸ Faced with this and economic blockade by Thailand, Souvanna turned towards the Soviet Union.

Diplomatic relations consolidated between Laos and the Soviet Union. Alexander N. Abramov became the first Soviet ambassador to Laos on October 13, 1960. On November 18 Souvanna and the Pathet Lao signed an agreement for the formation of a coalition Government and establishment of diplomatic relations with North Vietnam and China. This was the period of the deteriorating relationship between the Soviet Union and China. Beijing had accused Moscow that it was not doing its duties to promote world revolutions.

The Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971) did not comply to this because he wished to have the support of North Vietnam in the Sino-Soviet rift. The Soviet Union did not want to accept accusations by Hanoi of betraying the national liberation movements. It rendered support to the Pathet Lao. Moscow had to put through vehement criticisms against the American policy in Laos. On August 17, 1959, it had released a lengthy document on Laos, where it blamed the US for giving military help to the RLG and interfering in internal affairs of Laos.¹⁹ The document commented that neither North Vietnam nor China was sending military equipment and personnel to Laos. Moscow backed the Government of Souvanna, also supported by the Pathet Lao. It began to supply rice and oil from December 4, 1960 and the Soviet

planes arrived daily with these supplies.²⁰ Afterwards the Soviet Union began supplying military aid to the neutralist-Pathet Lao faction. On 11-12 December, the Russian aircraft delivered three 105 mm howitzers, three heavy mortars and ammunition to Vientiane.²¹ The airlift to the strategic Plain of Jars became a foremost priority to the Soviet Union with 180 sorties to Laos in between December 15, 1960 and January 3, 1961.²²

The Sino-Soviet rift was one of the major factors in determining the Chinese policy towards Laos. On April 16, 1960, the Chinese in an article entitled. Long Live Leninism, criticized the policy of peaceful coexistence and peaceful transition to socialism of Khrushchev.²³ As China shared over three hundred- and fifty-kilometers border with Laos, it viewed with concern prospect of any foreign power having a foothold in Laos. Apart from expressing concern over American military aid to the RLG Beijing criticized SEATO for its aggressive design over China and interference in internal affairs of Laos. The diplomatic relations furnished with Laos and China supported the agreement of Souvanna with the Pathet Lao. On October 7, 1961. a consulate was established in Phong Saly and after a month, Laos was visited by a cultural delegation. The Chinese military journal, *Kung-tso T' ung-hsun* mentioned that the US had supplied Phoum: 105 mm howitzers, M-24 tanks and Thai military personnel were training his troops.²⁴

The Pathet Lao-neutralist Government was short lived as Phoumi's forces marched towards Vientiane in December 1960. He became the defense minister in the new Government and Boun Oum was the Premier. The subsequent defeat of Phoumi's forces raised the possibility of American intervention. The Administration of John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) was stuck with the dilemma of whether or not to intervene. In an obvious warning to the Communist powers, the President ordered the Seventh Fleet to move into the Gulf of Thailand. The meeting of the SEATO Council, promulgated the decision that action might be taken unless the Pathet Lao agreed for a ceasefire.²⁵ The press conference of March 23, 1961 observed a crucial statement pronounced by Kennedy making it transpicuous that the US preferred a neutralized Laos but would not hesitate to intervene if necessary.²⁶ The meeting of the National Security Council revolved around the discussion of sending the American troops. But the Bay of Pigs invasion on Cuba of April 17 had made Kennedy to remark, "If it hadn't been for Cuba, we might be about to intervene in Laos." Fearing that the adversaries would think him weak, the task force in Okinawa was alarmed. The Commander-in-Chief of Pacific Forces received the order

to move American combat brigades of 5,000 personnel each to the northeast of Thailand and South Vietnamese coast as “a threat to intervene in Laos.”²⁷

Endeavoring Concord

There were attempts initiated to expunge the civil war completely.²⁸ India as being the Chairperson of the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICC) sent a message to Britain and the Soviet Union (Co-chairpersons) proposing reactivation of the ICC.²⁹ This resulted into an agreement that the need of the hour was to convene an international conference in Geneva to end the crisis in Laos. The different factions in Laos were to observe ceasefire and send their representatives to Geneva. On May 16, 1961, the 14- nation conference began consisting the signatories of the 1954 Geneva Conference (Britain, Cambodia, China, France, Laos, Soviet Union, US and both the Vietnams), the members of the ICC, Thailand and Myanmar. The Soviet Union, US and China sponsored Souvanna, Vientiane Government and the Pathet Lao respectively. It took more than a year for matters to synthesize and any endeavor to retain the harmony were apostrophized by hostilities. The problem of ceasefire provoked heated debates with charges and counter-charges. In late May and early June 1961, a battle began around Ban Padong, about 10 kms south of Plain of Jars. The Hmong tribes numbering about 9,000 were conducting guerilla operations against the Communists with help from the CIA chief of Vientiane.³⁰ Ban Padong was captured by 5, 00 Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese soldiers. This gave rise to sa kerfuffle and the American delegation headed by Averell W. Harriman (1891- 1986) walked out of the conference, which was suspended for five days.

The situation improved after the Kennedy- Khrushchev meeting on June 3 and 4, 1961 in Vienna. It had a health effect on the course of events in Laos. albeit temporarily. Laos was the only area, on which there appeared some prospect of agreement in the summit meeting. Kennedy said:

The only area that seemed to be promising in the accord was Laos. Both sides recognized the need to reduce the dangers in that situation. Both sides endorsed the concept of a neutral and independent Laos much in the manner of Burma or Cambodia. Of critical importance to the current conference on Laos in Geneva, both sides recognized the importance of an effective ceasefire.³¹

Until the three factions of Laos agreed to form a coalition Government and cessation of hostilities, a settlement in Geneva was not feasible.

Souvanna, Souphanouvong and Boun signed a communique in Zurich on 22 June in this regard. The declarations of Zurich were not followed with appropriate action and each faction began to build up their strength with fresh supplies. While the delegates in Geneva were preparing modalities of an agreement, the skirmishes continued, snowballing to the serious crisis of Nam Tha in 1962.

Phoumi's strategy was to continue the hostilities so that he would retain American support. Even he had announced that the Chinese and Russian troops were active in the area. The US did not believe in these and in January 1962 suspended the cash grant of 4 million dollars so that Phoumi would yield.³² The President had appealed personally to Phoumi to merge the RLG under a tripartite coalition led by Souvanna. The CIA handler of Phoumi also was transferred from Laos. In February, the US stopped the salary money that Phoumi used to pay every month to his army. The American pressure was to bring Phoumi to agree for a coalition Government.³³ The cutting off aid went on for four months. But, the supply of military equipment continued, lest the Pathet Lao along with the neutralists take a stronger position.

Nam Tha, a strong hold of Phoumi, situated about 10 kms from the Chinese border and 125 kms from Thai border was used as a base for probing into the Pathet Lao territory and the hostilities intensified by end of April 1962. It was a premonition that the CIA had pushed Phoumi to reinforce Nam Tha garrison. He believed that there would be policy difference in the US Administration as in 1960 and Phoumi could count on support of the CIA and Pentagon in opposing a coalition Government.³⁴ On May 6 Nam Tha fell into the hands of the Pathet Lao and Phoumi's troops along with the Commander-in-Chief of the RLA crossed to Thailand. Alarmed by the events in Laos, Thailand had sent its troops to Nam province bordering Nam Tha. The Thai concern was motivated by security and anti-Communism."³⁵ It wanted a friendly regime in Laos. Marshal Sarti Thanarat (1909-1963), the Thai Premier's hostility towards Pathet Lao was motivated by Communist phobia and he shared this with his close relative Phoumi. In the northeastern Thailand, Communist insurgency had been on increase with support from other side of the border along with China and North Vietnam.³⁶ Both the US and Thailand signed the Rusk-Thanat agreement on March 6, 1962, which spelled out that obligations under SEATO were "individual as well as collective."³⁷ The US declared unilateral defense guarantee and military assistance to Thailand magnified.

Alarmed by the Nam Tha developments, the US took measures to deter the Communists for further advances. There were non-identical opinions in the American administration regarding the course of events that were to supersede. The Pentagon, keen on preventing a coalition Government urged an all-out effort including a nuclear attack on China.³⁸ The State Department representing a political line advocated for a limited military intervention. The Seventh Fleet moved into the Gulf of Thailand on 12 May and two days afterwards, 1,000 American soldiers moved to Udom situated about 50 kms from Lao border. The US announced dispatch of 5,000 troops to Thailand. Australia, Britain and New Zealand also sent token forces. Kennedy in a press conference of 17 May said that the purpose of sending troops was for ensuring Thailand's territorial integrity.³⁹ The Pathet Lao troops did not violate ceasefire and the American soldiers did not cross the Mekong River. The crisis thus faded.

On June 7, 1962, talks recommenced between the Lao leaders once again on the Plain of Jars. A coalition government was coming up with Souvanna as the Premier. Phoumi and Souphanouvong were to be Deputy Prime ministers. The delegates of Geneva Conference presented on 23 July two documents on Laos; a Declaration on the neutrality of Laos and a Protocol to it.⁴⁰ The signatories pledged that they would not indulge in any manner affecting the sovereignty, independence, neutrality and territorial integrity of Laos. There was an embargo imposed on the initiation of foreign troops and the ICC would supervise the ceasefire. The 9 July statement of the Lao coalition Government, pertaining to *penkang* or neutrality was also included in the Geneva Accords. It had proclaimed establishment of diplomatic relations with all countries and adherence to five principles of peaceful co-existence.

The Diplomatic Role of Major Powers

The main participants of the crisis in Laos were on the brink of getting involved in a war, but they opted for a compromise. Behind the de-escalation, the considerations of major actors were obvious. By 1962, the strategic considerations of the Soviet Union and China over Laos were divergent. Whereas Moscow visualized Laos in the context of its relations with the US, China was following a policy of struggle and it was not yet talking of a policy of detente with the US. Khrushchev had strongly opposed a militant line on Indochina. In his speech of January 6, 1961, on *wars of national Liberation*, the Soviet leader had said that the Soviet Union was for peaceful co-existence.⁴¹ The Communist countries would support national liberation, but should not

internationalize it. In the crisis of Nam Tha, the Soviet Union did not interfere. It also asked the Pathet Lao to show a more flexible attitude for forming a coalition Government. The Soviet Union was interested more in the affairs of Europe. Its policy in Laos was to strengthen the bargaining position in Europe vis-a-vis the US. The limited arms supply to Pathet Lao-neutralist alliance in 1960-1961 was more of an exception than a rule as will be evident from the Soviet policy after 1962.

China supported the Pathet Lao as the victory of rightists would mean another pro-US Government in its southern border. Suspicious of the Soviet Union's policy of peaceful coexistence and its reluctance to provide nuclear weapons, China was anxious about the American military bases in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and the Philippines. Yet, it could not risk a war with the US. The weakness pertaining to the economic front after the Great Leap Forward movement was another major hindrance. Hence, it insinuated a dual policy in Laos; local military operations coupled with political negotiations. Wending one's way to the Geneva conference would be propitious for Laos would remain counterweighed. This would accompany the removal of Laos from the shielding of SEATO.

Following the dual revolutionary tactics, 'Nam Tha' demanded for the enticement by political negotiations. It was an imperative for the military strategies, exercised in the People's War to imbibe a blanket of political thinking.

Laos was not worth risking a global war for the US and it went to the Geneva Conference after its show of force in Nam Tha crisis had become successful. The Communists responded to the ceasefire. Kennedy applied coercive diplomacy with the intent to halt the Pathet Lao advance. This type of diplomacy points towards "focusing enemy's will rather than upon negating his capabilities."⁴² The US wanted to gain time so that in future anti-Communist forces could launch a struggle from an advantageous position. As Hilsman, the Director, Bureau of Intelligence and Research in administration of Kennedy had admitted: "We understood perfectly well that (it) was the starting gun. If we had used negotiations as an excuse to withdraw from Laos, we in effect would have been turning it over to the communists."⁴³ The application of show of force was to stall an outright victory for the Pathet Lao. The US favored a political solution, at least for the time being. The Kennedy- Khrushchev meeting in Vienna was another factor for a compromise solution. The reasons that played a vital role in shaping the decision of Kennedy were as follows -

i) The SEATO members were not unanimous in an outright intervention in Laos, ii) The American embassy, especially its ambassador, Brown, believed that a compromise formula was the best course of option and (iii) Increase in Viet Cong activities in South Vietnam required more troops and attention of the US.

North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao also agreed for de-escalating the crisis. Hanoi had seen that the Pathet Lao had increased its strength as compared to the time of Geneva Conference of 1954; numerically and area wise. It had become easier to send cadres to South Vietnam through north eastern provinces of Laos, which were controlled by the Pathet Lao. The landing of American troops in Thailand, Soviet pressure, political gain in a conference table and lack of resources to occupy whole of Laos were factors responsible for coming to Geneva talks. The Pathet Lao had changed its tactics from armed insurrection to national front as it did at the time of Geneva conference of 1954 and 1956-1957 Vientiane agreements.

Two basic and three preliminary conditions are to be present for a compromise settlement⁴⁴ and all these were there in the Lao situation of 1960-1962.⁴⁵ The basic conditions are stalemate and redistribution of aims. Stalemate in the battlefield was restored, when the US sent its troops in Nam Tha crisis and the Pathet Lao agreed to negotiate. It was to the middle faction of neutralists that both the rightists and Communists made concessions. Souvanna was acceptable to both and distribution of portfolios was easier. The three basic conditions are identity of parties, duration of conflict and existence of contact between the parties. In Lao scenario, identity of parties was well known. The conflict between the rightists and Pathet Lao was of long duration and quick victory was unlikely. The channel of communication was open due to meeting of the factions and presence of ICC.

A Failed Attempt?

The coalition Government that spurred after the Geneva Accords of 1962 functioned smoothly in the beginning with the three factions: left, neutrals and the right cooperating with each other. However, the troika or three-pronged administrative structure did not last long. Souvanna Phouma became Premier with charge of defense. Souphanouvong and Phoumi Nosavan, both the Deputy Premiers represented the left and rightist groups respectively. The decisions of the government were in accordance with unanimity rule. Such an arrangement was doomed from the beginning. The wrangling over

distribution of foreign aid began and each side endeavored to channel maximum to its own faction. Each also kept control of its military forces. Mutual suspicion of among three sides prevented the smooth functioning of the Government. There was also a split in the neutralist camp after a series of assassinations in the capital Vientiane. In politics of Laos henceforth witnessed two strands, the rightists and leftists with neutralist joining either faction. Though Souvanna wanted national reconciliation, he did not want that Pathet Lao should play a dominant role. He gradually drifted away from the Pathet Lao and moved towards right. The military Generals began to assume real power and he remained a 'symbolic' figure. By 1964, the three-dimensional administrative structure had become defunct and situation in Laos returned to pre- 1962 situation. The tripartite meeting of Souvanna, Souphanouvong and Phoumi Nosavan in September 1964 at Paris failed. The resentment had renewed and some of the signatories of the Geneva Accords observed the provisions by violating it. Laos was becoming a 'side show' of the Vietnam War.

The compulsions of the war, were kept in the minds of both the US and North Vietnam while fashioning the policy in Laos.

The indulgence of United States accentuated in Laos that was evident from the sight of the reconnaissance flights carried out over Pathet Lao strongholds by RF-1001 Voodoo Jets. To operate military aid, a Requirements Office was covertly set up within the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).⁴⁶ As commented by Senator Stuart Symington (1901-1988) in October 1969, the clandestine moves of the US administration appeared to be a mystery even to the American Congress.⁴⁷ The Vietnamese situation was getting tense with US administration's full support to the regime of Saigon. After the Tonkin incident of 1964, the USA was deeply involved in the quagmire of the worst war in history. Its policy in Laos became a part of strategy to prevent the collapse of the regime in South Vietnam. The new American President Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-73), reaffirmed the Vietnam policy of Kennedy in his statement of November 26, 1963. As the Pentagon Papers had revealed, there were plans:

For clandestine operations by the GVN (Government of South Vietnam) against the North and also for operations up to 50 kilometers in Laos; and as a justification for such measures, State was directed to develop a strong, documented case to demonstrate the world the degree to which the Viet Cong is controlled, sustained and supplied from Hanoi, through Laos and other channels.⁴⁸

The clandestine operations accommodated under the undeviating command of the US military in Saigon. The covert operations were aimed at warning and harassing North Vietnam so as to reduce its capability to “utilize the Lao Panhandle for reinforcing the Viet Cong in south Vietnam and to cope with PL/VM (Pathet Lao/Viet Minh) presence in Laos.”⁴⁹ The covert military operations against North Vietnam had the objective of checking advances by the Pathet Lao and Viet Cong. The United States was thinking in terms of domino theory. It is evident from the memorandum of Defense Secretary, Robert S. McNamara (in between 1961-1968) to the President on 16 May 1964:

Unless we can achieve this objective (independent, non-Communist South Vietnam) in South Vietnam, almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance.....Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to India to the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south, and Taiwan and Korea, and Japan to the north and east would be greatly increased.⁵⁰

In this grand American strategy, the sole aim was to check communist advance. Survival of South Vietnam was primary consideration and Laos was increasingly becoming involved. The covert operation that began on 1 February 1964 against North Vietnam had the motive of compelling Hanoi to ask Pathet Lao and Viet Cong to stop hostilities. This program code-named. Operation Plan 34A resulted in sending U-2 spy planes and commando raid to North Vietnam. The second part of the covert war was air operation in Laos to restrict the use of Lao territory to reinforce the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. The Ho Chi Minh trail passing through Laos was the main supply route for North Vietnam to send convoys carrying supplies to Viet Cong in the South Vietnam. There was bombing of southeastern Laos along the trail. The air war in Laos aggravated in 1965, but the prelude occurred in 1964. The three American ambassadors to Bangkok, Saigon and Vientiane along with the Deputy of 7th Air Force, and Commander-in-Chief, Pacific began to meet periodically to discuss course of action. The US also was opposed to a negotiated settlement at this time. William P. Bundy (1917- 2000), Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs wrote that the US would oppose conference on Vietnam and Laos and solution required military pressures.⁵¹ The problem of South Vietnam was uppermost in the thinking of US administration. The US did not want to give the impression that it was withdrawing from Indochina through conference route. Maxwell D. Taylor (1901 — 1987), the ambassador in Saigon had cabled the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk (in between 1961 and 1969) on August 9, 1964, about the disadvantages of withdrawing from Laos, “... (it) would look like evidence that US is seeking to take advantage of any slight improvement in non-

Communist position as excuse for extricating itself from Indochina via conference route. This would give strength to probably pro-Gaullist contention that GVN (Government of South Vietnam) should think about following Laotian example by seeking negotiated solution..."⁵² It is obvious that Laos was becoming a sideshow in the Vietnam war and Rusk rightly said that after 1963, Laos became a 'wart on the hog of Vietnam'.⁵³

The US air strikes that had started in 1964 greatly increased in subsequent years. There was more air strikes over northern Laos due to suspension of bombing over North Vietnam in later part of 1965 and beginning of 1966.⁵⁴ A new plan called SLAM (Seek, locate, annihilate and monitor) by B-52 bombers was envisaged. Navigational stations were secretly set up in Laos for guiding the planes bombing North Vietnam. The CIA supported Hmongs were protecting the Pho Pha Thi station, which was about 25 kilometers from North Vietnam border. In February 1968, the Pathet Lao captured the base and nineteen Americans assassinated. The domestic dissent in the US towards the Vietnam War was gathering momentum and on 31 March 1968 there was a partial bombing halt of North Vietnam to the north of 20th parallel. The planes rerouted to Laos along with the bombings augmented after a halt over North Vietnam on 31 October 1968. Between May 1964 and January 1969, the United States had delivered 410,000 tons of bombs into Laos and the bomber sortie was 52 per day in December 1968. The aircrafts were using napalm and defoliants sometimes.⁵⁵ The per capita cost of bombing was 560 US dollars; whereas the per capita income of Laos was 66 US dollars.⁵⁶ The bombing affirmed by heavy civilian enlisting was also responsible for creating a large number of refugees. Senator Edward M Kennedy (1932-), Chairman of the Refugee Subcommittee, estimated that the bombing in Laos was responsible for creating about 70% of the refugees.⁵⁷ The sustained bombing did not halt the Pathet Lao military advance. As indiscriminate bombing destroyed the regular sources of supply and rice production, the Pathet Lao turned more towards the North Vietnamese. The US air support to the army of RLG brought forth greater troop commitment by North Vietnam in Laos. Thus, the bombing had the opposite result even from the American viewpoint.

The North Vietnamese did not pull out all their troops after the Geneva Accords of 1962 and about 6,000 North Vietnamese army personnel remained in Laos. Taking into account the mountainous terrain along the Lao-North Vietnamese border, it was not possible to know the exact number of North Vietnamese troops that remained in Laos after 1962. With the motive of unification of both the Vietnams, Hanoi gave

unstinted support to the Pathet Lao by sending arms, ammunitions and troops. The Pathet Lao- controlled areas in northeastern Laos were of immense importance to North Vietnam for infiltration to the South. The Viet Minh cadres had returned along the Ho Chi Minh trail in 1959 to take part in fighting against the Diem Government in South Vietnam. After the regular bombing of North Vietnam and sending of American ground troops to South Vietnam, there was infiltration of North Vietnamese troops and supplies along the trail. The North Vietnamese troops in Laos manning the trail were also performing the advisory role for the Pathet Lao Army. In northern Laos, both fought against the Royal Lao Army (RLA). On 6 March 1970, the US President Richard M. Nixon (1913-1994) said about the growing number troops: around mid-1967 it was 33,000, which increased up to 67,000 in 1970. The US military attache at Vientiane gave the figure for 1970 as 48,000. The RAND corporation authors mentioned that there were about 40,000 North Vietnamese military men serving in Laos. Therefore, in all probability, the number of troops serving in Laos would be around 45,000 to 50,000. There were also small settlements of North Vietnamese along the Lao- North Vietnam border area. Some soldiers of North Vietnam disabled in the war were settling along this region. The ethnographic factor of same tribal groups living in both the sides of border was a contributing factor to this. One of the reasons for North Vietnamese involvement in Laos was concern for its security. Hanoi did not want a hostile regime on its western flank. One Vietnamese professor said that Laos and Vietnam were like lip and teeth, 'if you open the lip, the teeth will suffer'. The unification of both the Vietnams had long since remained the primary objective in the minds of Hanoi since 1956. Helping the Pathet Lao very well fitted into that strategy. The Prime Minister of Laos said, "For more than twenty years that country (North Vietnam) considered the kingdom of Laos as a natural area of expansion for its political and ideological ambitions... the Vietnam war also extends to Laos, and that this has been the case for the past twenty years, and it is escalating on a daily basis..."

Unlike the North Vietnamese and even Chinese, the Russians did not have much influence over the Pathet Lao. It recognized the Government of Souvanna as *de jure* one. The Soviet Union provided diplomatic support to the Pakthet Lao so that it was not burdened with allegations for neglecting a Communist movement. China had established an Economic and Cultural Mission at Khang Khay. It played a more active role by supplying directly to the Pathet Lao materials through north-western part of Laos. The Chinese built roads in along the Lao-Chinese border and connected it to places like Phong Saly, MOUNG KHOUA and MUONG SAI. The road building enterprise, comprise

about 6,000 Chinese out of which 2,000 were armed. Neither the US strafed these areas, nor the Chinese anti-aircraft fired at the American planes. China branded Souvanna as a “fool” for collaborating with the US against the Communist forces in Laos. The Pathet Lao, faced with American involvement and an equivocal Russian attitude, seemed to move closer to China than Russia.

The Only High Road- Amity and Harmony

The Paris Peace talks had started in 1968 to bring about a negotiated settlement to end the Vietnam War. The progress made at Paris had its impact on talks between the RLG and the Pathet Lao. Alternatively, when the progress at Paris stalled, the talks did not yield much inclination and tantalized scuffles. A new escalation or severe bombing followed any proposal. There was exchange of letters in the initial stages between Souvanna and Souphanouvong in February 1969. The cessation of US bombing was the main question. Souvanna did not accede to it in the beginning. Later, he agreed for it in the trail area only. He made it conditional with the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops. Therefore, the halt of bombing over the trail became an obstacle for negotiations. The Ho Chi Minh trail was important for both the US and North Vietnam because of its proximity to the Vietnam War. On 6 February 1970 Souvanna proposed neutralization of the Plain of Jars area and agreed to visit Hanoi for talks. However, in the same month there was massive US bombing on the Plain area to deny control of it to the Pathet Lao. The Pathet Lao called for establishment of a coalition Government after elections, cessation of hostilities, end of US intervention and adherence to the provisions of Geneva Accords of 1962. Peace efforts appeared to disintegrate by this invasion of South Vietnamese and American ground troops. Nixon had called for widening peace in Indochina on 7 October 1970, but after four months, he had agreed to an incursion on a massive scale of southern Laos. Another reason for not reaching any meaningful solution was the antagonistic role of the US embassy in Vientiane. The members of the political section as opposed to the US ambassador G. Mc Murtrie Godley (1917 – 1999), were in favour of a lenient attitude towards the Pathet Lao. The head of the political section sent feelers that the US could agree to halt its bombing in return for a cease-fire, resulting in its relocation after two weeks. In June 1971, the Pathet Lao demanded cessation of bombing as well as cease-fire for beginning of talks. The RLG did not agree to this and talks could not begin.

Conclusion

In the international sphere, the rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union on the one hand, and the China and United States on the other hand, brought about a climate of understanding. This rapprochement led to the Paris Peace Agreement on Vietnam, and Laos did benefit from this. Agreements in international sphere reduced the level of conflict in Indochina. The United States began to disengage from Vietnam. In the beginning of 1972, the Pathet Lao reaffirmed the five-point peace proposal of March 1970. They were in commanding position as two-thirds of Lao territory was under their control. Souvanna agreed to the Pathet Lao proposal as basis for talks. The Paris Peace talks were progressing and this led to the beginning of first round of talks between the Pathet Lao and RLG on 17 October 1972. However, there was no progress due to breakdown of talks in Paris. Both the US and North Vietnam had agreed to sign an agreement on 31 October 1972. This did not materialize. Finally, the signing of Paris Peace agreements on Vietnam on 27 January 1973 accelerated the negotiation process in Laos. Article 20 of the Accords mentioned that signatories would “respect the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Cambodia and the 1962 Geneva agreements on Laos” and “undertake to refrain from using the territory of Cambodia and the territory of Laos countries.” It further outlined that the internal affairs of both Cambodia and Laos can enjoy stability, only if the extraneous interventions curtailed. North Vietnam agreed to pull out its troops from Laos. The United States wanted to stop bombing in Laos before the meeting of twelve-party conference on Vietnam at Paris from 26 February to 12 March 1973. It put pressure on Souvanna to sign an agreement and conveyed to the rightists that bombing would stop by 25 February 1973. The rightists knew that there would not be any improvement in its military position without help of American bombing. The North Vietnamese relayed it to the Pathet Lao to agree on ceasefire. On 21 February 1973, an agreement on Restoring Peace and Achieving National concord was sealed.

The important provisions of the agreement were observation of ceasefire, withdrawal of foreign troops, establishment of a new Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU) and National Political Council of Coalition, neutralization of royal, capital of Luang Prabang and the city of Vientiane and establishment of a coalition commission for implementing the agreement. Article 1, stipulated that the 1962 Geneva Accords should be respected by the Lao factions, the US, Thailand and other foreign powers. It also prohibited sending of troops and arms to Laos by foreign powers. It also prohibited sending of

troops and arms to Laos by foreign countries. The agreement was an outright victory for the Pathet Lao. It bore a close similarity with their five-point proposal of 6 March 1970. The Pathet Lao placed a demand whereby the Souvanna and his neutralists called the "Vientiane Party" as they merged with those from the right. The tripartite structure of 1962 Geneva Accords was not there. Even, in Article 1, the name of North Vietnam was absent, whereas mention of the United States and Thailand was there in observing neutrality of Laos, Luang Prabang and Vientiane, were neutralized so that the Pathet Lao could station the troops.

There surfaced a breaching of the agreement as soon as it was signed. After two days of signing, the United States sent B-52 bombers over Paksong and Xieng Khouang. The pretext was the attack by North Vietnamese troops. Sporadic skirmishes were stalling the progress towards implementing the political provisions. The United States bombed Thatom Thavieng area on 16 and 17 April. North Vietnam continued supplying arms and ammunition to South Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia. However, conclusion of the Joint communique on Paris agreements on 13 June 1973 between the United States and North Vietnam opened prospects for negotiations on Laos. The draft agreement concerning the political provision of 1973 was signed on 14 September. The PGNU, another experiment in the coalition government, was formed on 5 April 1974. The Pathet Lao was gradually assuming more power and making its presence felt in various spheres of activities. With control of four-fifth of the area and half the population, the Pathet Lao was going to tip the balance in its favor. The interrelatedness of Laos to the events in Vietnam generated its own repercussion there. On 30 April 1975, communist forces entered the South Vietnamese capital Saigon. The reconciliation of both the Vietnams took place officially in January 1976. After the fall of South Vietnam, the Pathet Lao assumed effective control over Laos. The Government offices in provincial capitals, confiscated one by one. In November, the King Savang Vatthana (1907 – 1980), was convinced to resign by Souvanna and Souphanouvong. The coalition government in Laos was compelled to terminate itself and as a quotient, most of the rightist leaders fled to Thailand. On 2 December 1975, the crystallization of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) eventuated.

Notes

- 1 *Department of State Bulletin*, 28 February 11955, p.332
- 2 Senate, Committee on Appropriation, *Mutual Security Appropriation for 1995* (Washington, 1955), Hearings, Cong.833, Sess.2, 19544, p.305
- 3 Patit Paban Mishra, *A Contemporary History of Laos*, (New Delhi; National Book Organization, 1999), p.49
- 4 General John A. Heintges, Chief of the PEO in between 1958 and 1961 called it as a similar organization like MAAG. See, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Military Cold War Education and Speech Review Politics, Hearings before the Special Preparedness -Subcommittee, part 5, Cong. 87, Sess. 2, 1962 (Washington, 1962), p.2371. The American Senator Silvio O. Conte, who visited Laos in 1959, commented that the staffs of PEO were ex-marines and army men. House of Representative, Committee on Appropriations, Operations Appropriations for 1962, Cong. 87, Sess.1, 1961 (Washington, 1961), p.589.
- 5 House of Representatives, Committee on Government Operations, U.S. Aid Operations in Laos, Seventh Report, Cong.86, Ses. 1, 1959 (Washington, 1959), pp. 45-46.
- 6 Roger Hilsman, *Jo Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, 1967), p.115.
- 7 David Wise and Thomas B. Ross, *The Invisible Government* (New York, 1964), p.173.
- 8 Hilsman, n. 6, p.122.
- 9 For details pertaining to the formation of the Pathet Lao, See, Patit Paban Mishra, "The Pathet Lao Movement" (M.Phil. thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of International Studies, New Delhi, 1974)
- 10 *20 Years of Lao People's Revolutionary Struggle* (Neo Lao Hak Sat Publications, n. p., 1966), p.11.
- 11 Statement by the President Ho Chi Minh after the Geneva Conference (Hanoi, Foreign Language Publishing House, 1955) pp.3-7.
- 12 *The Pentagon Papers*, as published by the New York Times (New York, 1971), p. 25.
- 13 Author's interview with Lt. Col. Chansamore Inthavong at Nong Khai refugee camp, Thailand, May 28, 1977.
- 14 Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p.92
- 15 Phoumi Vongvichit, *Laos and the Victorious Struggle of the Lao People against U.S. Neo-Colonialism* (NLHS publications, n.p.,1969), p.126
- 16 *New York Times*, September 12, 1960.
- 17 Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace* (Garden City, 1965), p.608. He was the President of the US in between 1953 and 1961.
- 18 Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F: Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), p.303.
- 19 For the full text, see, Royal Institute of Internal Affairs, Document on International Affairs, 1959 (London, 1959), pp, 261-265.
- 20 *Lao Presse*, November 25 and December 5, 1960
- 21 Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (London, 1968), p.159.
- 22 *Department of State Bulletin* (Washington, January 23, 1961), pp.114-115
- 23 For details see, *Peking Review*, no.17, April 26, 1960, pp. 6-23.
- 24 J. Chester Cheng, ed., *The Politics of Chinese Red Army* (Stanford, 1966), p.336.
- 25 P.C. Phuangkasem, *Thailand and SEATO* (Bangkok, 1972), p.34.
- 26 *Public Papers of the President of the United States, John F.Kennedy, 1961* (Washington, 1962), pp, 213-218.
27. *The Pentagon Papers*, n.12, p. 89.
28. For details see, Mishra, op.cit, pp, 71-75

29 The ICC was formed after the Geneva Conference of 1954 to supervise the agreements. Poland and Canada were the two members

30 The Pentagon Papers, n.12, pp, 134-135.

31 Department of State Bulletin, June 26, 196, p.993. Khrushchev had told Kennedy in Vienna that the Soviet Union had "no desire to assume responsibility in remote geographical area." See, Schlesinger, n.18, p.333.

32 New York Times, January 16, 1961.

33 Hariman said that the salary money was stopped as the Vientiane Government was not "negotiating in good faith for a coalition government." See, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Foreign Assistance Act of 1962. Cong. 87, Sess. 2, 1962 (Washington, 1962), p.369.

34 Hilsman, op.cit, p. 138.

35 For details see, Mishra, op.cit, pp, 81-83.

36 "Communist Insurgency in Thailand" (Unofficial Summary of the Government White Paper), South-East Asian Spectrum, vol.1 1, no. 4, July 1973, p.33. A separatist movement also was there in north-eastern Thailand, whose goal was creation of a neutral Laos.

37 Department of State Bulletin, March 26, 1962, p.499.

38 Hilsman, op.cit, p. 142.

39 Department of State, American Foreign Policy: Current Documents, 1962 (Washington, 1966), p. 1094.

40 For the text, see, UK, Central Office of Information, Laos (London, 1967), pp. 50-55.

41 Communism- Peace and Happiness for the Peoples, January-September 196] (Moscow, 1963), vol.1, pp. 389-391.

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51 Ibid, p.295.

52 Ibid, p.347.

53 Charle A. Stevenson, The end of Nowhere, American policy towards Laos since 1954 (Boston, 1972), p.180

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Federalism in India: An Analysis from the Perspective of Assam

By

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Abstract

The working of the Indian Federal System has been affected by the predominant position enjoyed by the national political parties and the lack of adequate politicization of the masses in the country. Further, the lack of a well-organized opposition capable of offering an effective challenge to the centrist ruling parties, and of forming a stable alternative government at the Centre, or even in a number of States, has been responsible for the steady growth in the trend of centralization of power in India. It has tended to reduce the States to the status of 'glorified and magnified municipalities.' Centralization of political powers in the hands of central leaders is bound to create a reaction from regions whose interests seem to have been ignored. The emergence of regional forces in India is deep-rooted in this malady.

Like the other regions of the country, demands for regional autonomy have also emerged in Assam in the post-independence period. The history of political development in the state shows that the relationship between the Centre and Assam was marked by a consistent and deep sense of grievance, injustice and negligence. The underlying causes of this political development were both political and economic. In this context, it is important to analyze the causes behind the emergence of regional forces in the state, so as to understand the federalizing process of the Indian Union. This paper highlights that the pace of development in Assam has been extremely cumbersome due to 'unequal treatment' meted out to the state by the Central Government. Under such circumstances, 'Assamese nationalism' found fertile ground for taking firm root in the Assamese conscience, and the middle-class elite

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undertook the task of consolidating this 'self-consciousness' among the Assamese masses, with the hope that mass mobilization might transform such conscience into a widespread movement to achieve the goals of socio-economic, political and cultural significance. The basic objective of the paper is to examine, to what extent, regionalism in Assam has been contributing towards the growth of the federal process and national integration.

Keywords: Federalism, Regionalism, Assam, Reorganization, Financial Relations, Immigration.

Federalism maintains a balance between the centrifugal and centripetal forces in a society. It has evolved as phenomena dealing with the problems of state-building and nation-building in a heterogeneous society. As a socio-cultural theory, federalism recognizes pluralism as the valid basis of collective peaceful co-existence; as political principle, it seeks to stabilize a pattern of constitutional diffusion of power in order to reconcile the twin concerns of common or generalized 'shared rule' with specific or particularist 'self-rule'; as an administrative arrangement, federalism coordinates the legitimate distribution of power and jurisdiction between central and the constituent units.¹ It unites diverse elements that have differences on political, historical, cultural, ethnic, linguistic or such other grounds. A federation is formed "where there is a desire to be united, but not to be unitary".² Its efficacy has been accepted and proved in many big countries of the world in modern times. The popularity of this model of government has led to the opinion that "this is an age of federalism". In a federation, the equation between Union and States, is not adversarial, or of 'either or' dichotomy, but of convergence in a pattern of cooperative distribution of jurisdiction and power. Federalism is not merely a structural arrangement but also a process of functioning.³ However, perhaps there is no federation in the world, in which the division of power between the Centre and the Units has been satisfactory to all those concerned, and without any controversy.

India has been regarded as the world's most classic, complex and largest social and cultural federation. The Indian political identity is the heritage of India's national movement, coalescing the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-regional segments into a holistic federal system.⁴ However, its continental size, diverse character, and centripetal governmental character have given rise to debate and contradictions between the Centre and the States in the post-colonial period. This debate on the Centre-State relation within the Indian federation has been a persistent feature of Indian politics, especially after the fourth general election of 1967. The general

election of 1977 brought about a qualitative, and, apparently, durable change in the country's political landscape thereby reviving the demand for a revision in Centre-State relation. In fact, in 1977, the perceptible erosion of power structure at the Centre created certain new dimensions in the federal polity in India. Under these circumstances the regional political parties in Tamil Nadu, Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab and the CPI (M)-led government of West Bengal and many others began to assert their demands for greater State autonomy. This trend did not stop, even though Mrs. Indira Gandhi regained her lost power after the fall of the Janata Government at the Centre. The same trend continued under the dominance of Rajiv Gandhi's Congress rule at the Centre. The demand for restructuring the federal polity to make it more suitable to the needs of the society has been raised from a wide spectrum of political commitments. The CPI (M) in West Bengal and Tripura, the AIADMK and DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh, the National Conference in Jammu & Kashmir, Akali Dal in Punjab, AGP in Assam and Janata Party in Karnataka are not the only champions of this demand; some of the leading opposition parties in one way or another are also emphasizing on the need for reshaping the federal polity. The Centre responded by setting up the Sarkaria Commission to look into the issue. This pursuit of institutional change and innovation accelerated in 1989 when the National Front coalition, with V.P. Singh as Prime Minister, assumed office at the Centre in the Ninth Lok Sabha. In the subsequent elections of 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004 and in 2009 no single political party could secure absolute majority in Lok Sabha. As a result, the trend of coalition government emerged in national as well as state politics. However, in the Sixteenth Lok Sabha election (2014) and the Seventeenth Lok Sabha election (2019), BJP secured absolute majority, thus challenging the trend of coalition politics at the Centre. In spite of this, the Centre-State tension continued towards the third decade of this century, during UPA's two consecutive terms under the leadership of Congress as well as even during the present NDA government led by BJP, wherein, the sinews of Indian federalism remain under strain. Whether it was the intransigence of the Centre over adhering to its earlier commitments on GST compensation to the states, or the moves of some states to withdraw their cooperation with Central Government agencies like the CBI, the tensions are high.⁵

Like the rest of India, regional forces have emerged in the politics of Assam. The State of Assam had been under the Congress Government, with a slight break from 1977-79, till the installation of the AGP Government in 1986. Ordinarily it was expected that since the State was ruled by the Congress, there should have been a very cordial

relation with the Congress government at the Centre, but the history of political development in the State would clearly show that the relationship was far from being happy and was marked by a constant and consistent sense of grievance, injustice and neglect. The causes for this were both political and economic. The most significant political reason was the Centre's policy of reorganization of Assam, which led to a bitter confrontation and a sense of helplessness and frustration in State leadership.⁶ In the economic field, issues such as the location of first and second oil refineries in the public sector, determination of oil-royalty, establishment of industries, extension of railway broad-gauge lines, inadequate allotment of funds for development plans etc. greatly contributed to Assam's confrontation with the Centre.⁷ Another important constituent, which created bitterness between the Centre and Assam in the post-colonial period, involved the continuous influx of people from outside and other parts of India to Assam, leading to the threat of the very existence of the indigenous Assamese people.

In the post-independence period, the region is said to have often vied with the nation. Regionalism is rooted in India's manifold diversity of languages, cultures, tribes, communities, religions and so on, and encouraged by the regional concentration of those identity makers, and fuelled by a sense of regional deprivation. Positively oriented scholars have seen values in regionalism in the context of nation-building or national cohesion, making the political system accommodative of timely meeting the demands of the regions. Keeping in view these facts in mind, this paper is an attempt to examine, to what extent, regionalism in Assam has been contributing towards the growth of the federalizing process and national integration in general. It highlights the pulls and pressures on the issue of the reorganization of States in Assam and the reactions of the Assamese elite to the issue in particular. The paper also focuses on the Centre-Assam financial relations and reactions of the Assamese elite towards it. In addition, this paper endeavours to highlight how the issue of migration has been affecting the Centre-Assam relations and has regionalized the politics of Assam. Thus, this paper tries to bring to light the Centre's approach towards the regional aspirations of Assam, which in turn influences the federalizing process of the country.

Formation of New States and Assam's Reorganization

Article 3 of Indian Constitution addresses the topic of the "formation of new States and alteration of areas, boundaries or names of existing States". It says that that the Parliament may by law form a new State by separation of territory from any State or by uniting two or more States

or parts of States or by uniting any territory to a part of any State; increase the area of any State; diminish the area of any State; alter the boundaries of any State; alter the name of any State; provided that no Bill for the purpose shall be introduced in either House of Parliament except on the recommendation of the President and unless, where the proposal contained in the Bill affects the area, boundaries or name of any of the States, the Bill has been referred by the President to the Legislature of that State for expressing its views thereon within such period, as may be specified. This principle of creation of new States and to change state boundaries has been of enormous consequence to the politics of Assam. The Central government carved out separate states in the face of the aspirations for cultural and political autonomy of the tribal peoples in the post-independence period. The Union Government's policies of carving separate states out of Assam deeply affected its politics in the subsequent period. It energized movements for further separation and discouraged a politics of accommodation.⁸ Nagaland was formed in the year 1963 after its separation from Assam, and afterwards the successive reorganization of Assam's boundaries had begun in Northeast India. The incumbent Chief Minister of Assam B. P. Chaliha, considered reorganization as the "vivisection of Assam" and maintained that "the people and the Government of Assam will not accept any decision of the Centre which will be ruinous of this part of the country".⁹ However, the trend of break-ups continued with Meghalaya being declared as sub-state in 1970, and then into a full-fledged State after being carved out from Assam. In 1972, it was Mizoram which was separated from Assam and made first into a Union Territory, and then into a full-fledged State. In the same year, NEFA was transformed into a Union Territory with a new name 'Arunachal Pradesh'. It was made a separate state in 1987, thus successfully accomplishing the process of creation of new States in the Northeastern region. The Assamese elite did react sharply against the move of the Centre to reorganize Assam as the Assamese middle class had firm conviction on their ability to keep the territorial integrity of Assam intact. In spite of the formation of the Assam Anti Federation Action Council (AAFAC) in 1968, which had undertaken the first initiative to organize a state-wide strike against the process of reorganization, the Union Government's efforts for reorganizing the State continued, and it resulted in large-scale disturbances. The people observed 'Unity Day' on January 24, 1968 and they even called for Assam's separation from India due to rising anger against the Union. The issue of reorganization unleashed a series of disturbances in the state which largely moulded the attitude of the Assamese elite and the masses towards the Centre.

The working of Indian federalism was such that it ended up dissecting post-colonial Assam into five States, and afterwards there were more demands in the offing for further division of the existing state. The Assamese intelligentsia and legislators had expressed a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the reorganization of Assam. By criticizing the role of the Central Government, the Assamese elite demanded that it should not be encouraged. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika called it “a sharp knife to fragment the Northeastern region”.¹⁰ As already noted, in spite of the efforts of the Assamese middle class to protect the territorial integrity of the State¹¹ in the form of AAFAC in 1968 itself, Assam had to face subsequent reorganization, which was sharply criticized by Assamese legislators and intelligentsia. The proposal for the reorganization of Assam was squarely blamed by the leader of the United Legislature Party Gaurishankar Bhattacharyya, who termed disintegration as a “contagious disease”.¹² Debeswar Sarma was also not in favour of separation as “the reorganization would divide the people of the eastern region further which might serve the purposes of the ruling clique in New Delhi”.¹³ Terming the reorganisation as an “imposition”, member of Assam Legislative Assembly Dulal Chandra Barua said, “the reorganization is an important imposition from above and is the creation of some political leaders for their personal benefit.” Lakshyadhar Choudhury regarded that “creation of seven different administrative units in one Reorganization Bill is something like a break of nature where a woman is giving birth to seven children at a time” and “this ‘Black Bill’ would dig our own grave”.¹⁴ Thus, the Assamese intelligentsia and legislators showed a deep sense of dissatisfaction towards the policy of reorganization of Assam, and public opinion was formed against the policy of the Centre.

However, due to the constitutional nature of Indian federalism, Assam was dismembered by the Centre. The voices of the intelligentsia and legislators of Assam were hardly given importance by the Centre, though the Constitution asked to contemplate the views of the concerned legislature. It gave rise to fresh demands for more and more States. It is argued that the ongoing demands for new States such as Bodoland, Karbi Anglong Autonomous State, and Kamatapur etc., are also as a result of this policy of the Centre. The success of one encourages others to press further their demands, give rise to some fresh demands. We may cite the example of the creation of states on linguistic basis in India which gave a fillip to regionalism and encouraged fissiparous tendencies in the national polity. Similarly, special legislative and administrative safeguards were provided in the Constitution through the Sixth Schedule to protect the cultural and social heritage of the people of Northeast India. These diverse socio-

political and economic factors combined together to spawn ethno-nationalist movements in Northeast India. The creation of ethnic autonomous states on the basis of ethnic identities led to the triumph of ethno-nationalism in India. The situation has become so acute today that certain political parties have already started demanding another State Reorganisation Commission.¹⁵ In this way, the Centre's policy for carving separate States out of Assam affected the reorganization politics in Assam in the subsequent period. Actually, most of the movements for separate States in Northeast India started with a demand for socio-economic upliftment. The nature of the market economy, uneven economic development among the ethnic groups and weak nature of the fiscal division of powers in India further increases the grievance of ethnic groups, and no effective efforts have been made to meet the demands these groups. Long years of indifference by the Centre as well as the State Governments to such grievances, a result of Indian federalism, further agitate the tribals' minds, finally leading to the demand for separate States. In addition, the emerging conflict between the governing and non-governing elites at various levels played a crucial role, as the elite tend to generalize their conflict and build up movements mobilizing their respective communities. Added to this, the Centre's policy of carving out separate States encourages others to press further demands and give rise to tensions. Due to the Centre's continued neglect and indifference towards Assam's socio-political and economic issues and the existence of the region's sub nationalist sentiments, new demands of separate States have come to the fore and the Centre conceded it one after another in the post-independence period. Therefore, a section of Assamese elite and in some cases the non-elites of the plains have uttered their voice of dissent against the policy adopted by the Centre. Thus, the voice raised by Assamese elite against the reorganization of Assam is, indeed, a dominant issue which moulded the attitude of the Assamese elite towards India's federal structure in the post-independence period.

Fiscal Federalism and Assam

Again, in the area of distribution of fiscal resources, Indian federalism is probably at its weakest. The Constitution of India empowers the Central Government to exercise enormous powers in the fiscal field. The States are certainly unhappy in this financial arrangement. They often claimed that resources allocated to them are inadequate in enabling them to discharge their responsibilities. They complain of a widening gap between their own resources and needs, a trend indicating their increasing dependence on the Centre for resources.

They assert that their resources should be commensurate with their obligations and responsibilities. Sanjib Baruah argued:

India's Central Government controls the great bulk of financial resources including income tax, corporate tax, import and export duties, and excise duties on major items. It controls the money supply and exercises control over the central banks besides the nationalized banks, currency, and foreign exchange. Except for taxes on agricultural income and property, and sales taxes on certain goods and services, all the major sources of tax revenue are in the hands of the Centre.¹⁶

As a result, financially too, Assam depends heavily on the Centre, given our centripetal constitution, to discharge its responsibilities. It has been argued that Assam is an endowed region, gifted with many natural resources, but the endowments have not translated into economic growth and development. The path of development adopted by the Indian State is fundamentally capitalist in nature, which in turn generates severe regional disparities, including one in Assam.¹⁷ Assam is located in a strategically sensitive region which faces perennial floods, political disturbances and severely underdeveloped infrastructure of roads, railways, communication, power, terminal and institutional facilities and abject poverty.¹⁸ Hence, Assam fails to draw worthwhile private investments for its economic development. Subir Bhaumik argued, "Instead of investing in the region's infrastructure and allowing market forces to do the rest the country's federal government pumped huge quantum of funds to sustain the region's economy".¹⁹ Terming Assam as a "colonial hinterland", Tilottama Misra stated that "there has been a systematic exploitation of the rich resources of Assam, before 1947 by the colonial rulers, and since then by the Indian State and Indian capitalists who have continued the colonial tradition".²⁰ Thus, Assam continues to remain an agriculturally and an industrially backward State in spite of having rich resources. It led to the growing awareness among the Assamese people of being subjected to gross economic exploitation on a scale comparable to, and even sometimes worse than in the pre-independence days.

Thus, the policy of strengthening the Centre at the cost of the States, has led to serious consequences to the federalizing process of the country. Despite being the country's largest producer of tea, oil, plywood and forest products, Assam is one of the poorest and industrially most backward States of India. After decades of independence, Assam is lagging far behind the rest of the country in the most important parameters of growth. Its economy remained predominantly agrarian. In addition to this, Assam faces perennial

floods. The failure to control the Brahmaputra and other rivers contributed towards keeping Assam agriculturally backward, in spite of its fertile soil. The growth in the agricultural sector in Assam was virtually stagnant, leading to dependence on other States for food grains.²¹ The development in the industrial sector is also not encouraging. Assam is deprived of her legitimate share and benefits because of the practice of concealment of the real profits of tea earned by the foreign as well as big Indian capitalists.²² Moreover, except the Assam Tea Corporation which is a public sector organization owning a few sick and unprofitable tea gardens, the overwhelming majority of the big gardens are under foreign and Indian companies which are controlled from London and Calcutta. As a result, a large share of profits from the Assam gardens flow out to foreign and Indian big companies.²³

Another important natural resource in Assam is crude oil, which has become a cause of contention between the Centre and Assam in the post-independence period. Assam has an estimated reserve of 1.3 billion tonnes of crude oil and 156 billion cubic metres of natural gas.²⁴ But the oil industry did not develop in Assam contrary to the expectations of its people. The Government of India was not interested in establishing refineries in Assam till vigorous movements were started by the people of Assam. Apart from the question of the establishment of refineries, the people of Assam have been feeling that the State is not getting adequate royalty for crude oil.²⁵ Further, the Government of Assam repeatedly raises demands to release the existing oil royalty of around Rs. 10,000 crores, but in vain. Very recently the announcement of Union Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas Dharmendra Pradhan, regarding the global bidding process for 12 small oil fields in Assam has been strongly criticized by several nationalistic organizations of Assam.²⁶ In addition, there was much possibility in establishing petro-chemical and some other ancillary industries on the basis of natural gases extracted from the oil fields in Assam but, the growing importance of natural gas as a source of energy and as raw material for a variety of modern industries does not seem to impress the Central Government much. Of late, as a result of the Assam Accord, the Assam Gas Cracker Project registered as 'Brahmaputra Cracker and Polymer Limited' on January 8, 2007 is coming up at Lepetkatta in Dibrugarh, which has started commissioning from the year 2016.

Besides, Assam has tremendous potential in tourism, and that has not been exploited at all. It can be termed as a miniature India which has diverse ethnicity, varied climatic conditions, national parks like

Kaziranga and Manas, rain forests, beautiful hilly landscape, tea gardens and rivers like the Brahmaputra and Barak and its tributaries. Assam has each and everything from topographical diversity to scenic beauty and from rich historical background to a unique ethnic life-style. In spite of its identification as a tourist destination, it lacks the infrastructure and the marketing drive to attract tourists. Richly endowed with flora and fauna, landscape and ethnic diversity, Assam can be developed into a viable tourist hotspot.

Another cause behind the slow pace of economic development of the State has been inadequate transport facilities. Even after decades of independence Assam remains far behind in railway networks. The British constructed the existing metre-gauge railway line in Assam in 1881 to facilitate the transportation of tea and troop movements whenever necessary. So, Assam's single main railway line passes through the tea-belts of the State without touching most of the important towns and villages. The railway map of Assam has remained the same since the British days, and the motives which impelled the British to construct the railway in this region appear to be shared by the administrators from Delhi. Hence, Assam remained backward in spite of the enormous wealth due to the post-colonial capitalist nature of the economy of India.

Immigration and Assam

Another important constituent factor which created bitterness between the Centre and Assam in the periods after independence was the continuous influx of people from outside and other parts of India to Assam, leading to threats in the very existence of the Assamese people. Due to the encouragement of British officials and support of Assamese middle class personalities, immigration to Assam started during the colonial period. The demand for labour in the tea plantations was the first major reason to turn to immigrants. In the absence of a strong local labour force, Assam had to face mass-migration of labour, mostly from the Jharkhand region, to serve the interests of the British capital. Tea labourers' massive migration transformed the demographic structure very significantly in Assam. However, it was not only tea plantations that had to depend on immigrant labour. Other enterprises that developed during Assam's economic transformation in the nineteenth century such as coal and oil fields and the construction of roads, buildings and railways, also attracted immigrant labour. There were, in addition, immigrants who came to Assam to occupy the new middle-class positions that required new skills, such as the knowledge

of English, and to take advantage of the expanding opportunities for trading.²⁷

The situation became more critical when the virgin and fertile soil of Assam attracted a large number of immigrants from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in early parts of the 20th century. The colonization of land by settlers from East Bengal began in a big way in the second decade of the twentieth century, to supply food grains and other agricultural products to the growing modern sectors in Assam. The immigrants gradually subjugated the vacant *chars* and forest lands of Assam. The Census Report of 1911 mentioned for the first time, about the movement of immigrants from East Bengal to Assam's waste lands. Over the years, Assam transformed from a land abundant and thinly populated State, to a land scarce and thickly populated state. The rapid growth of population adversely increased the pressure on land. By the 1931 census, the population movement had become even more dramatic.²⁸ The issue of immigration got a new direction with the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan.

The partition of the country in 1947 did not prove as a deterrent to the immigration problem. After the partition, Bengali Hindu 'refugees' from East Pakistan found no difficulty in crossing the porous border and settled down either by themselves or through their relatives, unchecked and undetected, to escape communal violence. Out of Assam's total population of 9,044,000 in 1951, as many as 1,344,000 or 14 percent were born outside Assam. But the way in which the refugee problem was dealt with by the Central Government created a considerable resentment in the minds of the Assamese elite. They felt that the economic and cultural existence of the Assamese people was being seriously menaced by the 'so-called refugee problem', and created to cover up the old question of immigration. Indeed, what they pleaded was that 'Assam' must exist, and exist as the homeland of the Assamese people.²⁹ The Assam Government even expressed its unwillingness to continue settling refugees without limit.³⁰

This flow of refugees was also seen during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 in which more than 12 million refugees poured into India, of which one million stayed back in Assam.³¹ On March 19, 1972 the Indira-Mujib Treaty was signed and accordingly Bangladesh agreed to accept the immigrants who entered India after March 25, 1971. The growing numbers of migrants in Assam are viewed by a large section of the Assamese people as a threat to their socio-cultural, political and economic life. Prior to the elections of 1978 to the State legislature, the regional parties like Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) and

Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad (PLP) and their supporters raised the issue of the outsiders in Assam and their threat to the Assamese identity. However, the concept of outsiders remained vague. Later, the Asom Sahitya Sabha (ASS) intervened to narrow down the meaning of the term to post-1951 immigrants from foreign countries with questionable citizenship status, and this got wide acceptance amongst the other constituents of the movement. The Assamese people began to think that the continuous immigration from neighbouring countries to Assam and inclusion of their names in the electoral rolls would endanger their distinct identity as a nationality as well as the sovereignty of India. The final stage for the Assam Movement on the foreigners' issue was set in April 1979 when there was the need of holding a parliamentary bye-election of the Mangaldoi constituency. For the election voters' list was newly examined and in the process the names of many foreigners were found out from the voters' list by the tribunal set up by the State Government in the Mangaldoi Parliamentary constituency. It generated a very strong fear-psychosis among a large section of the Assamese middle-class. Gradually, it engulfed the majority of the Assamese masses. The press and the leadership persuaded the common masses to become their ally in their movement for asserting their identity. By mid-1979, the AASU took up the leadership position in organizing the students and the masses for a movement. Besides, a co-ordination body known as the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was formed. The Asom Sahitya Sabha, the Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal and the Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad were the main constituents of the AAGSP. The AASU and AAGSP led movement was supported by the Assamese bourgeoisie, the press, the rural gentry, a large section of the middle class including some bureaucrats and police officials, the employees of the State Government, contractors, transport operators etc. However, a few scholars exposed the intolerant and chauvinistic dimension of the movement, which threatened the basic foundation of the composite society of Assam.³²

After six years of agitation, the anti-foreigner movement culminated in the Assam Accord, which was signed on August 15, 1985 between the movement leadership and the Union Government. After the accord was signed, the leadership of the movement took up the initiative to form a regional party in Assam with the help of like-minded organizations. As a result of lot of deliberations and discussions with organizations, that is, the PLP, AJD etc., the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional political party, was formed just 67 days before the Assam Legislative Assembly election was held in December, 1985. The AGP participated in the elections to the State legislature and secured absolute majority by

securing 64 seats in the 126-member assembly and formed a government under the leadership of Prafulla Kumar Mahanta.

The primary demand of the foreign national movement was to detect foreigners, delete their names from the electoral rolls and deport them from the country, and the Accord was supposed to be a panacea in resolving this vexed problem. However, the process of detection of foreign nationals in Assam has been extremely slow. It is opined that the timeframe of the historic Assam Accord is made meaningless by the government. The descendents of earlier immigrants have become Indian, and fresh immigration is still continuing. A large number of Bangladeshis have clandestinely migrated to India, a process that continues unabated. Seeing these developments, in 1998, the then-governor of Assam, S. K. Sinha maintained that political parties have been underplaying the grave importance of the immigration problem and have been viewing it as affecting only the Assamese people. In his report to the President of India, he observed successive Governments at the Centre and in the State remains virtually oblivious to the grave danger to our national security arising from this unabated influx of illegal migrants.³³ After the completion of 25 years of the Assam Accord, AASU advisor Dr. Samujjal Kumar Bhattacharjee blamed the Central as well as the State Governments for their failure to implement the Accord. He maintained that in the last 25 years the Government had shown total negligence to solve the identity crisis of the indigenous people. "In these years Congress (I), BJP, AGP, CPI, CPM were in power at Delhi and Dispur"³⁴ but they did nothing to implement the Accord, Dr. Bhattacharjee lamented. The Gauhati High Court also pointed out to this grave illegal migrant issue. By scrapping the IMDT Act the Supreme Court even cautioned against illegal migration as: "The presence of such a large number of illegal migrants from Bangladesh, which runs into millions, in fact and 'aggression' on the State of Assam and has also contributed significantly in causing serious 'internal disturbances'".³⁵ The fears and anxieties of the Assamese elite regarding immigration were further deepened with the publication of the 2011 Census Report which once again highlighted the problem of illegal immigration in Assam. According to the Census report, the decadal population growth rate in nine districts, which are allegedly dominated by illegal immigrants, is over 20 per cent. Decadal growth rate of Dhubri district bordering Bangladesh is the highest in the State with 24.40 per cent. On the other hand, eastern Assam districts like Sivasagar, Jorhat etc. registered around 9 per cent population growth and these districts do not share any international border. Significantly, at 16.93 per cent, Assam's decadal population growth rate is less than the national average of 17.64 per cent.

However, Assam's density of population is 397 against national 364 in the 2011 census.

Due to this unabated immigration, Assamese public opinion has continued to remain agitated over the issue. In an interview with *The Assam Tribune*, Lt. Gen. S. K. Sinha, former Governor of Assam, expressed the view that "around 700 kilometres of the international border with Pakistan was fenced by the Army in just over a year, that too in tough terrain of high mountains. But the 260-odd kilometres of fencing in Assam could not be fenced in 27 years since the signing of the Assam Accord, which showed lack of political will of the Government in sealing the border to check infiltration".³⁶ Even after completion of 30 years of the Accord, with AGP Government for two terms at intervals, no substantial progress has been made in major issues like the detection and deportation of foreign nationals and borders remained as porous as it was before the Assam Accord. Besides, no effort has been made to provide constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards to protect and preserve the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.

NRC, CAA and Assam

As already noted, due to the continuous influx of people from Bangladesh to Assam, a six-year-long Assam Movement or Anti-Foreigner Movement took place in Assam. The movement culminated in the signing of the landmark Memorandum of Settlement, the Assam Accord, between the agitating parties and the Union Government on 15 August, 1985. However, the process of detection and expulsion of immigrants suffered a setback for a considerable amount of time due lack of efforts on the part both the Central as well as the State Government.³⁷ The first attempt of systematically detecting foreigners was started by updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) through a Pilot Project in two circles- one in Kamrup district and another in Barpeta district in the year 2010. It had to be aborted within four weeks amidst a huge law and order problem that resulted in the killing of four persons. After a long time, the task was again finally taken up at the behest of the Supreme Court's order in the year 2013, in regards to writ petitions filed by the Assam Public Works (APW), Assam Sanmilita Mahasangha and others. Since then, the Supreme Court of India continuously monitored the process of the updation of the NRC. The final NRC was published on 31 August, 2019 after the completion of all the statutory works, as per various standard operating procedures. In the final NRC, 3,11,21,004 persons were included, leaving out 19,06,657 persons, who shall have to approach a

Foreigners' Tribunal with an appeal against non-inclusion, if they so desire. However, the final NRC is yet to be notified by the Registrar General of India (RGI), under the Home Ministry, as those excluded will get an opportunity to present their case before Foreigners Tribunal. Again, the present Government in Assam, led by Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma has rejected the NRC in its current form and demanded a re-verification. The delayed verification and implementation of the NRC led to lot of resentment in the minds of people as well as nationalist organizations in Assam. It certainly affects the federalizing process of India.

Again, the enactment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) by the Narendra Modi-led NDA government on 11 December, 2019 to provide Indian citizenship to the persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who arrived in India before 31 December, 2014, sparked widespread national and overseas protests. The protests first began in Assam itself and spread swiftly in other States of India.³⁸ Five people were killed in the protests in Assam. Organizations like AASU, AJYCP, KMSS etc. spearheaded the agitation opposing the Act. These organizations also filed petitions in the Supreme Court, challenging the Act. The North East Students' Organisation (NESO), representing eight major students' organizations of the seven Northeastern States, declared 11 December as a Black Day for the entire Northeast. NESO stated, "This observation is to give a message to the Government of India that we are against this Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. At the same time, this is to remind our people and our posterity of yet another political injustice that the Government of India has perpetrated on the indigenous peoples of the Northeast".³⁹ (*The Economic Times*, 12 Dec, 2020). Thus, the nationalist organizations of Assam consider that CAA will threaten "our culture and identity".⁴⁰ Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent announcement on repealing the three contentious farm laws has again revived CAA issue in Assam. AASU advisor Dr. Samujjal Kr. Bhattacharjee said that the farmers' persistence with protests has been a lesson for those at the forefront of the anti-CAA protests, which had to be paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He said, "We must make the Centre scrap the CAA, which is a serious threat to the identity of the indigenous communities in the Northeast".⁴¹ These kinds of issues continue to dissatisfy the Assamese people and the nationalist organizations of Assam, which certainly moulds their attitude towards Indian federalism.

Thus, it is observed that the Assamese people have been in constant fear and anxiety of being gradually dominated by the immigrants. The

Assamese elite argue that the Government of India fails to protect the distinct socio-cultural, economic and political identity of the Assamese people. In spite of the historic six-year long national anti- foreigners' movement led by the AASU and AAGSP, and signing of the Assam Accord to protect the distinct identity of the Assamese people, immigration continues to be an influential and determining factor in Assam's politics. Though immigration started in the pre-independence period, the flow of illegal immigrants continued even after several decades of independence and it has caused a great deal of apprehension in the minds of the Assamese people regarding the sustenance of their distinct socio-political identity. It has been creating serious socio-political and economic problem for the indigenous population of the State. Therefore, the Assamese nationalist organizations like the AASU and AJYCP etc., has undertaken the task of strengthening consciousness among the people by forming public opinion on regional grounds, with the hope that their mobilization might secure their goals of safeguarding the socio-economic, political and cultural significance of the State. The lack of political will of the Government has further compounded the problem of immigration, which is obviously an issue that agitates the minds of the people. Actually, the problem of the unabated immigration issue regionalized the politics of Assam, and helped in the growth of regionalism in Assam, leading to the formation of regional political parties and some other regional organizations, which affects the Centre-Assam relations in the Indian federation and in turn, influences the federalizing process of the country.

Conclusion

A better understanding of the Indian federal system at the national level, depends at least to some extent upon an assessment of the pattern of politics within its states or units. Therefore, the role played by the States in India is naturally of considerable significance in understanding Indian federalism. The States may give a clearer picture of the developing political process as well as the precise shape of the developing federal system in the country.⁴² This study reflects these dynamics of Indian federalism. In post-colonial India, the peripheral State of Assam is severely affected by economic backwardness, ethnic movements, unabated foreign influx, separation and insurgency. Democracy is also severely injured here due to gross negligence of the Centre and the inefficiency of the state government. Because of the capitalistic mode of development and modernization adopted in independent India, Assam has come to face acute regional disparities, which simultaneously create sub-regional, sub-national and ethnic

movements. It becomes one of the most deprived regions and has remained an economically depressed and politically subjugated State within the federal democratic polity of India. The national bourgeoisie with the help of the regional bourgeoisie, reap the benefits of development and push weaker nationalities to further marginalization. Hence, some of the groups of Assam, particularly the ethnic communities, who once considered themselves as a component of the larger Assamese society and had assimilated with the Assamese, are now trying to revive their own identity and demanding for political autonomy because of their oppressed status and hatred against the dominant Assamese ruling class. The autonomy movements have virtually caused the consolidation of regionalism and sub-nationality questions. More significantly, the insurgency problem added fuel to the fire in Assam. Finally, the unabated illegal infiltrations of the foreigners into Assam from neighbouring countries create serious havoc and pose a threat to the existence of the indigenous people. Therefore, a peculiar discontent and feeling of alienation has been generated among the people of Assam, which amply got reflected by mass participation in several social and political movements. These movements virtually result in the consolidation of regionalism and subsequent sub-nationalist demands, which in turn regionalize the politics in India. Nevertheless, the existing problems may be solved to some extent by an ideological struggle and mobilization of the masses of all sections of people far beyond the interest of dominant Assamese elite and the elite of the ethnic communities as well as to end perennial exploitation of the Central Government. This study reveals that the regionalization of politics in India has been reinforcing the federalizing process of the country. Actually, regionalism in India is integral to the process of national integration and it is not something that is anti-system or anti-national. Secondly, it is revealed that the policy of separation and accommodation on the part of the Centre energized a variety of ethnic movements and demands for separation within the existing State. It is further reinforced by the factors like ethnicity and elite conflict. Hence, with the passage of time, a general anti-Centre attitude developed among the people of the State, particularly among the elites of the dominant section in the plain areas. But this kind of anti-Centre feeling did not affect the national feelings. Thirdly, the pace of development is extremely lethargic in post-colonial Assam due to 'unequal treatment' of the Central Government. Therefore, a peculiar discontent and alienation has been generated among the people of Assam, which amply got reflected by mass participation in a number of social and political movements. It is interesting to note that the Assamese elite pleaded that the Units should not be deprived from the legitimately entitled powers, which can be left to them without jeopardizing the

safety of the Union. In fact, the demand for more power and resources for the States is intended to strengthen the federal polity to enable it to meet the growing needs of the people. Further, in the study, it has been revealed that the demands for more power and rights over natural resources for the States actually strengthen the federal polity and enable it to meet the growing aspirations of the people, particularly in the context of Assam. Fourthly, the problem of unabated immigration issue regionalized the politics of Assam and helped in the growth of regionalism in Assam which affects the Centre-Assam relations in Indian federation and, in turn influences the federalizing process of the country. This is not to imply that a strong feeling of preservation of distinct identity is anti-national or anti-state. Rather, the fulfillment of such aspirations would strengthen the federal polity of the country. Thus, it appears from the study that regionalism is a contributing factor in the federalizing process of the country and regionalism in Assam has been contributing towards the growth of the federal process and national integration in India.

Notes

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Patriotism and Social Service: A School Curriculum in Bengal in Early Twentieth Century

By

Sarvani Gooptu *

Abstract

While tracing the sources of revolutionary ideas in Bengal in early 20th century, I have focused on a particular region from where many revolutionaries hailed. More important than mere number was the notion of inspiration that was said to have emanated from the name *Barisal* leading to a sense of pride in the contemporary Indians and a sense of distrust in the British Administration in the early years of the 20th century. The ideas and teachings of Aswini Kumar Dutta and the Brajamohon School and College with its band of dedicated teachers undoubtedly played an important role in the formation of the mind of the revolutionaries. What is interesting, is that these youths who emerged from this ambience were not only totally dedicated to the service of the nation in their demand of political freedom they also put community service on their list of priorities. That there has always been a link between commitment to the service of the community as an expression of patriotism and participating in the country's freedom movement is hardly ever highlighted in history books. It is this lacuna that I would like to investigate here. Through the available memoirs, biographies, autobiographies and writings in the contemporary books and journals I would like to trace that lost history of social service and spiritual uplift which was inspired in patriots emerging from this region.

Keywords: Revolutionary nationalist ideas, Aswini Kumar Dutta, Brajamohon School and College, Barisal, school curriculum and community service.

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No one in the recent pandemic times, denies the importance of social capital which is the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively and its vital role in controlling crisis has been acknowledged by all ruling governments in the world. But that 138 years ago a spiritual genius, who set a generation of students of his school on fire, with anti-colonial patriotism through social capital and social service, could envision such a notion of creating networks of service to the nation through a school curriculum, should be remembered by all future generations.

While tracing the sources of revolutionary ideas in Bengal in early 20th century, a point that is often raised is how so many of them hailed from the region of Barisal (in erstwhile East Bengal, presently Bangladesh), which came to be, in the first half of the twentieth century, synonymous with patriotism, community service and a source of indomitable pride. The ideas and teachings of Aswini Kumar Dutta, inspiring educationist, social reformer and patriot, exemplified through the school curriculum of Brajamohon School and College which he set up in memory of his father, and the tradition of community service in Barisal inspired by him, undoubtedly played an important role in the formation of the mind of the revolutionaries. These youths who emerged from this ambience were not only dedicated to the service of the nation in their demand of political freedom, they also put community service on their list of priorities. Through the available memoirs, biographies, autobiographies and writings in the contemporary books and journals I would like to trace that lost history of social service and spiritual uplift which was inspired in patriots emerging from this region.

Brajamohon College of Barisal

‘The very name of Barisal arouses a feeling of respect and spiritual fulfillment’ Manikuntala Sen, a student of Brajamohon College wrote in her autobiography, *Shediner Kotha*. ‘Just like its natural beauty was nourished by the numerous river streams like a mother, the spirit of the people of Barisal were nourished by careful training of Aswini Dutta and the faithful band of teachers of Brajamohon school and College. No one, young or old was beyond the influence of these people who possessed strength of character and morality which was almost divine.’¹ A teacher and later Principal in the College, Rajani Kanta Guha, writes that ‘Aswini babu left his lucrative law practice to concentrate on the improvement of the school and College. His deep love for knowledge, desire to spread education in the service of the nation, the

purity of his character, his selflessness and the almost tangible spiritual aura around him had a deep impact on the student community. When I arrived at the College the peak of its glorious years had passed but I have never experienced anything like that in my previous teaching experience'.²

The Brajamohon school was established in his father's name by Aswini Kumar Dutta in 1884. There was already a government school existing in Barisal but soon the number of applicants to the school far exceeded the number of seats. At the outset Dutta donated Rupees 35, 000 and continued for 18 years to teach without a salary. From the beginning he set out to make the school attractive to the students and their guardians through stipends and prizes as well as various clubs and associations. Above all there was a priority given to the practical training in social and community service. During graduation the student who came first was given a prize money of Rs 50/-. The school started with 84 students and within the fourth day had increased the roll strength to 234 and by the end of the first year it had 450 students.³ From the day of joining, the school students received a booklet containing advice on how to develop character and follow the rules of morality.

Within five years of the establishment of the school on 14th June 1889, it was expanded in to a College of second degree. Gyan Chandra Chowdhury was the first principal and under the next principal Brojendra Nath Chattopadhyay, the College in 1898 became a first-class college and B.A. classes were held. The College became so famous for its academic excellence that not only did the only competitive College, Raj Chandra College close down in 1905, B.M Collegewas praised by the British administration as well. Magistrate Bell is said to have reported that 'Barisal may be said to be the Oxford of East Bengal.

4

Besides the pursuit of academic excellence through the accomplished teachers and the excellent library provided by the school and College, the students were encouraged to join various socially useful associations. They were Union Brothers (*Aikya Sangha*), Purity Brothers (*Shudhhi Sangha*), Band of Hope (*Asha Bahini*), Band of Mercy (*Karuna dal*), Band of Labourers (*Sramik dal*), Debating Society (*Bitarka Sabha*), Sporting Club (*Krira Sangha*), Fire Brigade (*Agni Nirbapak Dal*) and Little Brothers of the Poor (*DaridraBandhab Dal*), Fine Arts Society (*Charu Shilpa Samiti*). The motto of the College was "Truth, Love and Purity." They also had a daily prayer which was composed by their Principal Acharya Jagadish Chandra-

When someone loses their precious possessions to fire
We will not like puppets stand
When death looms and sickness befalls
We will forever stay on guard
Singing the praise of the Lord ⁵

The students were encouraged to learn and practice the art of oratory and debating. They also performed singing and recitation at the various festivals that were organized at the College. The students and many of the teachers also contributed meaningful articles in the monthly magazine called *Chhaatrabandhu*.

Inspiration of Aswini Kumar Dutta

Dutta realized that his dream of creating good and noble students, could not be done successfully on his own. He needed teachers who would not only excel in their particular field but would also have strength of moral values. He had the capacity to attract such men and women and inspire them to work hard against adverse circumstances. In the words of Aurobindo Ghosh, 'How did he establish that influence which caused him to be thought dangerous? (by the colonial government since he was in prison when Ghosh wrote this piece). By philanthropy, by service. While ordinary colleges under the control of the Government were mere soulless machines where they cram a few packets of useless knowledge into the brain of the student, Aswini Kumar breathed his own lofty and noble soul into the Brajamohan College and made it an engine indeed out of which men were turned, in which hearts and souls were formed.'⁶The first principal of the school was Purna Chandra Chakraborty, then Bishnupada Bhattacharya and then Trailokyanath Bhattacharya. Among the teachers Kali Prasanna (later Principal), Jagadish Chandra Mukhopadhyay, Kalish Chandra, Akshoy Kumar, Satyananda, Monomohon, Satish Chandra, Brajendranath, Rajanikanta, Kshetranath, Chintahoron, Shashi Mohon Basak made their mark in the school and college. Dutta had the unique ability to attract the best teachers for the college and his reputation brought the best even though he could not pay them high salaries.

Dutta was said to have all the qualities of a teacher-versatile knowledge not only in languages but also in religious literature of various sects. He was well versed in Hindi and Urdu and knew Persian. He also knew Marathi and Oriya as well as English and French. His students were fortunate to be taught about the Buddhist Sanghas through his knowledge of Pali, much before it became common knowledge. He was an expert on Shelley and Wordsworth and his

students considered his teaching of Burke as extraordinary.⁷ Strength of character was according to him the most important lesson to be learnt at school and he wisely tried to teach it through his own example, his life and living were the best lessons for his students and compatriots. He did not care about his own wellbeing and always came to College in a coarse white cloth and ordinary shoes. This set a good example among his students and teachers. Surendra Nath Sen in his book talks about a student who was reprimanded for his luxurious clothes and instead of being chastened, replied in an arrogant manner. Dutta immediately removed him from school on the grounds that luxury was not a virtue of student life. Some years later when he was returning from Madras Congress, he was greeted at Puri with delicious food by some unknown youth. On his query the youth replied that he was the boy whom Dutta had thrown out of school 13 years ago for wearing rich clothes and that had taught him a valuable lesson for which he was eternally grateful.⁸ The tradition continued since Manikuntala Sen recalls that they were very simply dressed in white blouse and white sari and their feet were bare, under the guidance of their principal Snehalata Das who set a perfect example of simple living and high thinking by her own lifestyle.⁹

Dutta was never exclusive and reclusive in his lifestyle though he was from a Talukdar family and son of a renowned Judge. His doors were always open for his students to come with their various problems. He was a supporter of women's rights and education and tried in various ways to translate this into action. He admitted his brother's wife Savitri, as the first woman student of the College. He was one of the patrons and life-long member of the Barisal District Girls' School and also handed over to the government some donation for education of girls. He taught his wife to read and write and inducted his nephew's wives into Brajamohon school. Phulrenu Guha, who later became a pioneering figure in post independent India's feminist movement, was not only related to Duttabut was also educated in B.M College.¹⁰

A strict believer in Brahmacharya as essential for the true patriot Dutta accepted a married life without ever cohabiting with his wife. Bipin Chandra Pal in his book the *Late Aswini Kumar Dutta*,¹¹ was deeply impressed by this practice of self-restraint and discipline. He impressed upon his students of the evil of child marriage and underage pregnancies. Sen recalls that during the Swadeshi movement one of his students had committed the mistake of succumbing to family pressure and agreeing to a child marriage. He was terrified since he knew how against child marriage his mentor Dutta was. But Dutta was very gentle with him and advised him to concentrate on teaching his wife to read

and write and not start a family too soon.¹² He generally advised newly-weds not to have children till the woman was 20 and the man 25. His students carried his ideals all over the country and Sen says that during the Swadeshi movement there was not a single college in India where a B.M. College graduate did not teach and in addition to the subject he was engaged to teach, he would spread the ideals of his alma mater. In this way Dutta's teachings and values spread all over north India.¹³

The training that the students received in the school and College prepared them to make sacrifices for their nation in future. The lessons they learnt in the different clubs and associations, they applied in their future life and the services they rendered to the suffering populace of Barisal, made them fit to make large sacrifices for the nation. Once a week the Bandhab Samiti met at the College hall. A teacher would read a prayer and give a lecture. AswiniKumar Dutta or the Principal would preside over the occasion and sometimes Dutta narrated his life experiences which the students enjoyed very much.¹⁴

Community Service as School Curriculum through Various Associations

That community service was made a part of the school and college curriculum in B.M. College has been testified by many and as the Principal Rajani Kanta Guha wrote, "I do not know of any other school or college which took up such an ideal of active social service as part of their curriculum".¹⁵ The little Brothers of the Poor were set up by Aswini Dutta, Girish Chandra Majumdar, and Barada Prasanna Roy and this band of young boys and their teachers became an institution in Barisal. The "Little Brothers of the poor" set up in Brajamohon school was the end product of the Barisal Janasadharan Sabha set up by Dutta himself for multifarious enquiries into the life of Barisal like population census, schools, census of school students, water works, improvements of road, public health.¹⁶ Whenever they were called, they would be at the house of the sufferer to succor them. The Brothers made no distinction between rich and poor, Hindu or Muslim in their service. In a speech delivered at Howrah on 27th June, 1909, Aurobindo Ghosh said that, among the rights of every nation, 'an impulse towards brotherhood' made for the right kind of association which 'stood by labour and service, and self-sacrifice, whose object of existence was to help the poor and cure the sick...This was what Aswini Kumar Dutta strove to bring into organize existence.'¹⁷

It was also the prototype of the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti which organized famine relief work in the latter half of 1906 in such an impressive scale through its 160 centres that Sister Nivedita hailed this work as the 'greatest thing ever done in Bengal'.¹⁸ The Swadeshi Bandhab Samiti drew its recruits largely from the staff and students of the Brojomohan institution.¹⁹ Aurobindo Ghosh in the *Karmayogin*, *A Weekly Review*, in 1909, discussed the work of the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti, where he writes about the "crimes" committed by the members for which they were repressed by the colonial government. Firstly, they continued the work of the Little Brothers of the poor- service to the poor and suffering and 'no one who was sick was uncared for.' Secondly, they helped those who were suffering silently from the ill effects of the famine. The Samiti boys identified them through door to door inquiries and helped them in various ways. Thirdly, the family feuds and quarrels which had been registered in the district courts were sought to be settled out of court through negotiation and mediation, the aim being to 'increase peace, love and brotherhood in the land.' The young men also had the 'hardihood to organize and help the progress of the Swadeshi in the land' considered to be the greatest of their crimes. Finally, this was an association which as Ghosh pointed out, 'has a very dangerous and lethal weapon called a lathi', the use of which was an art openly taught to the school and college students as physical education. All these "crimes" according to Ghosh, led to its suppression²⁰, yet its influence lingered in the hearts of the students throughout their lives.

There were other influences which had an impact in this regard – like the activities of the Brahmo Samaj whose moral and social values Aswini Dutta implemented in the educational institutions and also inspired him to make the introduction of girl students possible in the conservative ambience of Barisal. Manikuntala Sen describes how the first student was made to come in a covered-vehicle right up to her classroom and then she would pull her head covering right over her face and enter her room which was totally secluded from the sight and hearing of the boy students. Even when the roll call was made Savitri would simply make a noise with her bangles and she would be marked present. There was a wooden partition between her and the class and she would look at the teacher teaching through a hole in the partition. When in the mid-20s, Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay came for inspection he declared that there should be no such barriers between the girl and boy students.²¹ Sankar Math, a religious institution or ashram which was alleged to be the training ground of the revolutionaries of the Jugantar group was another influence on the students of the school and College.

Participation in Swadeshi Movement

Aswini Kumar Dutta was called the uncrowned king of the ordinary people of Barisal. The very fact that the state considered Barisal as a dangerous area at par with the hill tribes was due to Dutta's inspirational mobilization during the Swadeshi period. Education and culture were according to him most important for inspiring the people. His influence was so great that all his students were deeply moved by patriotic spirit and the movement against the division of Bengal. It was under the third Principal Rajani Kanta Guha that the College participated whole heartedly in Swadeshi movement ignoring the government injunction, the Carlyle decree that students should not participate in any anti- government movement.

From the beginning of the Swadeshi movement, the students played an active role through their normal social service vocation in spreading the virtues of the ideals Boycott and Swadeshi all over Barisal. As Sumit Sarkar wrote in *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, they helped Aswini Dutta in "quiet and sustained humanitarian work among the villagers...in building up a solid base for nationalism in Barisal. The associations he set up among his students were the prototype of the samitis of the swadeshi age."²²

The students of B.M school and college participated in the movement more actively during the Bengal Provincial Conference in April 1906. Since the government had already launched their repression on Barisal, having stationed Gurkha troops there and taking strong punitive action against students attending protest meetings. Torn between the need to protect the future of the students as well as the need to have volunteers for the imminent Conference, Dutta announced that only those students who were willing to face government wrath should join as volunteers. He refused to be cowed down by the threat of the government to shut down the college. Finally, 300 students signed their names. A large area of the College campus was prepared for the Conference. On 15th April a huge procession led by Anti Circular Society protesting against the ban on shouting of the slogan *Bande Mataram* was targeted by the police under British orders. A number of students were injured and the Conference was disbanded. Surendranath Banerjee and many others were arrested.

The Government's reaction to the student movement alternated between repression and conciliation. They sometimes tried to play on the emotion of the leaders. As a letter from Bampfylde Fuller, Lt

Governor of the new province of East Bengal and Assam created by the Partition of Bengal, to Dutta on 14th August 1906 shows- , "Before leaving India I must write to beg of you, for your country's sake to take the opportunity, that my resignation affords, of abandoning a position of hostility to the British government which must be fraught with evil consequences. It has been a matter of deep regret to me that you should have taken so prominent a stand in opposing a Government which only needs the cooperation of leaders of the people to benefit the country very greatly. I have been hoping all along that you would reconsider your position. For you are, I am aware, not one of those who render to their country lip service only. To the cause of education, you have devoted practical and successful effort, remembering that philanthropy as shown by deeds. I beg that you will reflect upon a situation and upon the harm, which the affiliation is causing to the youth of your people and emphasize the self- denial you have practiced in the past- an act of renunciation which however distasteful to you will be for lasting benefit to those whose interest you have at heart."²³

When cajoling and advising did not work they used other measures. Initially the British Administration was not against Dutta's social service efforts but as Prithwish Chandra Roy wrote an editorial in *Bengalee* that due to the success of the Boycott movement in 1905, Barisal soon became an eye sore of the government. 'Such is the abnormality of the circumstances under which we live that the very virtues were turned against him.' Dutta's powers of organization were looked upon with distrust and his school, which had extorted the admiration of a host of English officials was believed to be the breeding ground of sedition. Roy quoted Sir Andrew Frazer who made a veiled threat against the success that the school was making in creating staunch anti-colonial patriots among the students. "I do not wish to discourage, far less abolish, an institution of this kind' Frazer said in 1904 of Brajamoho Institution'.²⁴ When neither cajoling nor threatening had any effect, and as Roy said, it was decided that Aswini Dutta would be attacked at his weakest spot- the Brajamohon school and college on which he showered the love of a father. The students of the College were targeted so that they could not get government jobs, or nor did the deserving students get government scholarships.

Finally, Aswini Kumar Datta and Satish Chandra Chattopadhyay were interred according to the regulation of 1818 in 1908. By the time he was released 14 months the school and the College were in dire straits. Realising, that he would not be able to sustain the school and the College, Dutta accepted the clauses by which the government agreed to give aid to the twin institutions. It became a government institution in

1911 but certain conditions were laid down. There would have to be a change in the composition of the teaching community and a new Principal would be installed. The young Deputy Magistrate Nrityalal Mukhopadhyay became the new Principal. He was followed by Satish Chandra Chattopadhyay.

Dutta was not happy with the changes of 1911. He was aware of the difference between western and Indian mentality and as he had already pointed out in 1906, this difference in national character and its future plans must be kept in mind while outlining a syllabus for education of the youth.²⁵ Once the management of the school and College was taken over by the government in 1911, he was even more convinced. As he wrote in *Atma Pratishtha*²⁶, "The system of education that is prevalent in our country is not only not bringing about any improvement in the nation but in fact is accelerating its decline is evident to us all...we are forgetting our own national tradition by this insistence on a non-Indian education...It is true there is much to learn from western education and the proponents of national education must incorporate the benefits into their syllabus...It is of utmost importance to open the path of independent thinking on national lines for the students through the curriculum... It is necessary to incorporate vocational training so that future employment is assured for those who come to study in the schools and colleges...Every village should have a national school (set up with money gathered from people locally) teaching reading writing, religious education, mathematics, agriculture and handicraft. ..I have already experimented this at the district level where 30 schools have been set up. This movement (if embraced by the rich and educated people in the districts and villages) will bring about national welfare." In the last years of his life Dutta decided to convert the school and college to National school and College even though he was not in favor of the non-cooperation movement. He had never let political opinions stand in the way of improvement of the College and this was no exception. Unfortunately, after converting the school into a national school its condition deteriorated.²⁷ Finally, after his death in Nov 1923, the BM school and College came under the University of Calcutta.

It is true that discussion on the link between patriotism and humanitarian service through associations is rare but it is not as if the great thinkers of the country were unaware of its importance. Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1909 of the samiti as being the glory of national life. Of the different types he referred to 'the associations for social service for helping the poor and the sick' that Swami Vivekananda 'preached' and Aswini Kumar Dutta 'strove to bring into organized existence'.²⁸

Bipin Chandra Pal had suggested in 1905 in his essay *Amader volunteer dal* in *Bhandar* that 'volunteers engaged in conferences should be converted into regular bodies and employed in work round the year on the model of the Barisal students.'²⁹ After Aswini Kumar Dutta's death Bipin Chandra Pal wrote in *Forward*, on 8th Nov 1923 that 'it is hardly possible to exaggerate the influence of teachings and the example of his life on the present generation of his countrymen. In all Bengal his personality was the centre that radiated far and wide the spirit of service and truth. To him gravitated the yearning and loving hearts of a generation of men, young and old, for light and lead...His organizing powers found magnificent expression in the field of social service. The distress of humanity had an irresistible call on his heart.... the memory of his great life will ever be the pole star to the nation to guide it in the path of truth and righteousness.'³⁰ Aurobindo Ghosh wrote in *Karmayogin* in 1909, that, the ideal of love and service to the community and motherland, that these young men of Bengal followed was what, 'moved humanity all over the world. When the spirit of Aswini Kumar Dutta comes into every leader of the people and the nation becomes one great Swadesh Bandhab Samiti, then the national ideal would be accomplished.'³¹ That community service and education needed to be interlinked for national welfare was the lesson Aswini Kumar Dutta wanted to impart to the nation and that spirit moves various school and college schemes like NSS and has remained relevant even today.

Notes

¹Manikuntala Sen, *ShedinerKotha*, Calcutta: Naba Patra Prakashan, 1982, p. 13

² Rajani Kanta Guha, *Atma Charita*, Calcutta: K.P. Basu Printing works, 1949, p. 51

³Bishwa Biswas, *Mahatma Aswini Kumar Dutta*, Calcutta: Biswas Publishing House, 1968, p.22

⁴Bishwa Biswas, opcit, p. 28

⁵ Translation mine. The original song was - *Agnidahekehosarboshyakhoyay, dharayenarobo, putulerpraye, Rogirshiyore, mrityurshojyay, jagibogahibotahari naam*

⁶ Aurobindo Ghosh, *The Right of Associations*, *Karmayogin* 1(2), 1909, in *Collected works of Sri Aurobindo*, Vol 8, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Pub Dept, 1997, p. 75

⁷Surendranath Sen, *Aswini Kumar Dutta*, *Aswini Dutta Centenary*, Calcutta: Nabarun Printers, 1956 p. 13

⁸ Surendra Nath Sen, *Aswini Kumar Dutta*, opcit, p. 16

⁹Manikuntala Sen, *ShedinerKotha*, opcit, p. 22

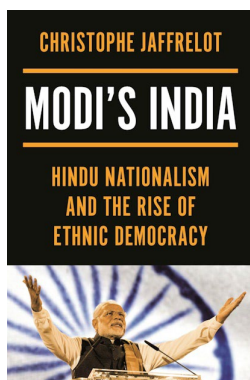
¹⁰Sarvani Gooptu, "Phulrenu Dutta Guha: Childhood", *Dr Phulrenu Guha: Profile in perspective*, kata: All India Women's Conference, Jan 2008, pp.10-21

- ¹¹ Bipin Chandra Pal, *Swargiya Aswini Kumar Dutta*, Calcutta: Barisal Seva Samiti, 1960, p. 30
- ¹² Surendranath Sen, opcit, p. 18
- ¹³ Ibid. pp. 21-22
- ¹⁴ Rajani Kanta Guha, *Atma Charit*, opcit, p. 367
- ¹⁵ Ibid, p. 368
- ¹⁶ Tirtharanjan Chakraborty, *Aswini Kumar* Vol I, Motilal Ghoshal, Barisal: Basanti Press, 1929, p. 52
- ¹⁷ Aurobindo Ghosh, *Karmayogin*, opcit, p.74
- ¹⁸ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908*, New Edition, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, p. 242
- ¹⁹ Ibid.p. 290
- ²⁰ Aurobindo Ghosh, *Karmayog in*, opcit, pp. 77-78
- ²¹ Mani Kuntala Sen, *Shediner Kotha*, opcit., p. 30
- ²² Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908*, opcit, p. 216
- ²³ Sarat Kumar Roy, *Mahatma Aswini Kumar*, opcit, p. 142
- ²⁴ Ibid, p. 295
- ²⁵ His welcome speech as President of the Welcoming Committee during the Provincial Congress held at Barisal in 1906, quoted in Bishwa Biswas, *Mahatma Aswini Kumar Dutta*, opcit, p. 62
- ²⁶ This was his speech during the AICC's Bengal Provincial Conference at Dacca in 1913, published later in Aswini Kumar Dutta, *Atma Pratishtha*, Adhyayan, Calcutta, 1967, pp17-20
- ²⁷ Tirtha Ranjan Chakraborty, *Aswini Kumar*, Vol I opit, p. 87
- ²⁸ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, opcit, p. 300
- ²⁹ Ibid, p. 300
- ³⁰ Quoted in Sarat Kumar Roy, opcit, pp. 293-4
- ³¹ Aurobindo Ghosh, *Karmayogin*, opcit, pp. 82-83

Book Review

By

Ambar Kumar Ghosh *



Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2021

The book makes a comprehensive analysis of the national consolidation of Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Hindu nationalist politics under its charismatic leader Narendra Modi since 2014 and its impact on the socio-political as well as institutional fabric of Indian democracy. The work focuses on the compelling political appeal of Modi's personality and messaging that has led to his meteoric political rise from being the three times Chief Minister and most popular leader of Gujarat to the national political scene as BJP's Prime ministerial candidate who successfully led the Hindu nationalist party to an unprecedented decisive victory in both 2014 and 2019 national elections. The book reflects upon the nuanced intermixing of the conceptual categories of national-populism, majoritarianism and authoritarianism in order to better understand Modi's extremely effective political mobilisation of Indian electorate based on multiple indices-as the proponent of India's right-wing Hindutva movement, as beacon of hope for cleansing elite-led corruption-ridden system, for delivering better developmental governance and dignity to the poor, to provide decisive and bold leadership, particularly regarding national security, both as the principal challenger to the incumbent Congress-led UPA government in

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2014 elections and also as the incumbent Prime Minister of the BJP government in the 2019 elections. The book's thrust on Modi's political appeal and its impact on Indian democracy makes it a crucial study due to two primary reasons. First, as the book rightly points out that it is under Modi's leadership, BJP has been able to capture national power with an absolute majority for the first time in national elections of 2014 and 2019 and also formed governments in many states during this period. With Modi at its helm, BJP effectively overcame the limitations that it hitherto faced in galvanising substantial electoral support needed (more than 30 percent vote share) to come to power on its own. More importantly, Modi-led BJP's strong Hindu nationalist appeal also belied the much discussed 'moderation' thesis which claims that radical parties can only succeed in mainstream politics when they dilute their radical ideological predilections for gaining acceptability from wider sections of people. Second, as BJP under Modi firmly presided over the echelons of power, the right-wing groups under the broad umbrella of the Sangh Parivar found a conducive political environment for advancing the objective of building a *defacto* 'hindurashtra' with minimum resistance from the India state, paving the way for India's turn into an ethnic democracy in multiple ways.

Introducing the central question of the book, the study divides the evolution of Indian democracy calling it 'three ages of Indian democracy'- conservative democracy led by 'Congress system' from independence to late 1980s in which constitutional democracy was established and progressive socialistic and secular politics was floated, but the power structures remained largely dominated by the entrenched upper-caste elite and feudal aristocracy or 'local notables.' In the second phase, the political assertion of certain sections of lower castes and marginalised sections through 'silent revolution' constitutes the period of deepening of Indian democracy. With the emergence of lower and marginalised sections in the power structures, the traditional elite who got cornered took refuge under the Hindu nationalist movement led the BJP in 1990s and 2000s that finally gained momentum with the rise of Modi since 2014. The book delves deep into this third phase of Indian democracy in which successful blending of Hindutva with populism by Modi led to successful political consolidation of the Hindu majoritarian forces that facilitated the return of the traditional upper castes and class in power that the author called the 'revenge of the elite'. The book systematically unpacks the nature of this third age of democracy in India under the political regime led by Modi, in which religious majoritarianism and populism shaped the contours of an ethnic variant of democracy in India interlaced with 'electoral authoritarianism.'

The book offers its arguments in three parts. In the first part, the book briefly introduces the nature, evolution and major strands of the Hindu nationalist movement in India and analyses Modi's political style and strategy that helped the expansion of the support for Hindutva politics. Since Modi's stint as Chief Minister of Gujarat to his rise in national politics in 2014, he deployed a highly effective political instrument combining Hindutva majoritarian politics with populism. The book records that Modi's populist appeal constituted three populist strands. First, creation of the 'real virtuous people' in form of the Hindu majority in opposition to the 'other'. The 'other' comprises of the minorities, particularly Muslims, migrants, the Congress party and its dynastic leadership and other opposition parties, the traditional English-speaking elite comprising of critical 'liberal' media, sections of dissident voices in civil society and intelligentsia and also the neighbouring Muslim-majority nation Pakistan. Creation of the antagonistic 'other' and demonising it is an integral part of populist political appeal. The book notes that the crucial aspect of Modi's national-populism has been the delegitimization of plurality in the socio-political realm. The political adversaries like the opposition parties like Congress and other parties along with dissident voices in the media and civil society are discredited as 'anti-national' and 'urban naxals'. Such attempts of denigrating of parties opposed to the BJP projecting them as not only political adversary but also as 'enemies' of the nation enfeeble the political plurality that is indispensable for a vibrant multi-party democracy in India. This has been accompanied by creating 'a homogenous people' of Hindu majority that marginalises the minorities, immigrants and dissidents. Secondly, Modi's charismatic popular appeal makes the quintessential personality-centric populist leadership style that witnessed the rise of a 'larger than life' figure of Modi, who not only personified the homogenous 'people' but also has established unmediated connect with them bypassing democratic institutions. His image as an ascetic sacrificing leader/guardian to the people captures Morris-Jones categorisation of "saintly politics" that builds on his popularity. Elections are fought in the name of Modi alone bypassing other national and state-level leaders of the BJP. Third, the narrative of 'victimisation' premised upon the notion of Hindu vulnerability has been craftily juxtaposed with projecting Modi as a victim of relentless attack from the opposition Congress party and the 'corrupt elite.' The 'real' people, the Hindu majority, whom Modi's populist appeal claimed to represent, is projected as being hitherto deprived, neglected and disfavoured by the elite establishment led by Congress, who appeased the minorities and migrants for vested interest. This narrative gives rise to the notion of Hindu majority's perennial 'victimisation' raked up by creating 'majority community's inferiority complex' that gives rise to the

‘politics of fear.’ This goes along with Modi’s projection of himself as a victim of the wrath of a corrupt nepotistic political establishment as he posited his humble background belonging to the Other Backward Class (OBC) community compared to his political adversary, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and the Gandhi family who are projected an entitled, corrupt, incompetent and dynastic leadership. But such victimisation is interlaced with the extraordinary traits of Modi’s personality as he climbed the social ladder to reach the top position representing and protecting the ‘real people’ despite all ‘hurdles.’ This has paved the way for the politics of hope and dignity which has expanded BJP’s support base across various sections beyond its traditional upper castes and upper/ middle-class supporters. For the non-dominant lower castes who didn’t benefit from the social justice politics and reservation system, they are the ones who are the disgruntled and marginalised, yet numerically sizeable sections who found hope in the Hindu nationalist politics led by Modi for symbolic as well as substantive representation. They also constituted the poor and the ‘neo-middle class’, representing the lower aspirational sections. The first part of the book also deals with the unique model of Modi’s welfarism as he promised jobs to the poor in the election campaign but typical of populist rhetoric, such promises hardly transacted into concrete policies reminiscent of another popular PM and Congress leader, Indira Gandhi’s political appeal. The book observes in this context as pointed by scholar Laclau that “populists often do little for the poor but claim to belong to them because they are the people and the poor epitomise the people.” Modi’s populist political repertoire on social welfare schemes which were launched in his name harped on upholding the self-esteem and dignity of the poor instead of tangible material benefit; “shifting pro-poor policies from redistribution to dignity-oriented schemes” that does little to check the ever-increasing economic inequality.

The second part of the book argues that with Modi’s rise to prime ministership, though in the first term, laws mostly remained unchanged, Hindu nationalist forces got comfortable breathing space. The proponents of Hindutva at several levels emerged in the structures of power that includes ministers in Modi cabinet with RSS background. It is accompanied by increased access of the Sangh Parivar to the levers of power with the ability to influence policy making, education system and institutional apparatus of the Indian state in many ways acting as ‘a shadow government and a parallel power structure’. Moreover, efforts towards ‘Hinduisation’ of the public sphere was initiated with strict prohibition of cow slaughter and beef ban in many BJP-ruled states and with strong efforts to prevent religious conversion to minority communities. And many ruling party leaders asserted the

“Hindu essence” of the Indian identity bypassing the doctrine of “secularism” dubbing it as political gimmick of the opportunistic Congress party leadership of the past and the present. The dissenting voices that include some academic institutions, NGOs and other members of civil society were discredited as ‘pseudo-liberals’ accused of acting against the national interests. The study records that the minorities were attacked as a socially prejudiced environment got headway by ostensibly projecting the majority Hindus as a ‘dying race’ ‘allegedly due to minority’s ‘domination.’ This sense of Hindu vulnerability created paranoia amongst the majority community that propelled anti-minority sentiments projecting Muslims as “having links with Pakistan and the Islam-equals terrorism equation”. Campaign against ‘love jihad’ deriding inter-faith marriages between Muslim men and Hindu girls and propagation of reconversion into Hinduism (gharwapsi) of sections of minorities took pace. The book further notes that preventing Muslims from buying land in Hindu dominated areas, ‘forced privatisation of the religious space of minorities’ in some regions, lynching of Muslims and Dalits in the name of cow protection rose in this period. Apart from that, low intensity communal violence, creation of anti-Romeo squads in Uttar Pradesh and other vigilante groups along with digital vigilantism indulging in violence and the political protection accorded to them, ‘militarisation of state’ in form of increased police repression and ‘encounters’ of alleged criminals, mostly minorities, have also been major patterns recorded in the book. Such activities were carried out by the Sangh Parivar- affiliated vigilante groups like Bajrang Dal and other who worked with relative impunity from local administration. The book succinctly underlines that such vigilante groups indulging in moral policing includes activists those are “unemployed youth searching for self-esteem” as foot soldiers whom the author calls the ‘angry young men’ comprising the bulk of Hindu nationalist movement cadres.

The book, in the first two parts established the proposition of national populism coupled with majoritarianism that facilitated the rise of ring wing vigilante groups practicing anti-minority campaigns leading to the consolidation of a de facto ‘Hindu Rashtra’. The third part of the book further explores the strands of ‘competitive or electoral authoritarianism’ that took shape during this regime since 2014. This section first deals with loosening of institutional bulwarks of democratic accountability like anti-corruption ombudsman-Lokpal, Central Information Commission (CIC) that supervises the Right to Information (RTI) procedure, pale resistance of CBI in the project of increased ‘politicisation of police’ along with National Investigative Agency (NIA). Most importantly, the book closely captures the nature of the role of highest judiciary during this period which comprised of

visible resistance from Supreme Court which didn't succumb to executive's pressure in many instances followed by some trends of conformism that the author feels are due to ideological affinities and self-inflicted wounds of the judiciary. Second, this section also closely looks at the 2019 national election in which the populist repertoire of standing with people against the elite continued with special emphasis on national security that gave a larger electoral victory to Modi-led BJP. Modi's remarkable popularity due to his appeal amongst dominant ethnic community as 'son of the soil', his charismatic image reflecting 'worldly asceticism', 'willingness' to fight infiltrators, his popular welfare populism brought the *vishwas* dimension in politics as trust on Modi amongst poorer sections went beyond the conventional parameters of governmental performance. Also, BJP's well-oiled election machinery with a dense network of Sanga Parivar's foot soldiers further consolidated during its tenure in power, on-ground and digital vote mobilisers, building of effective caste coalitions with support of non-dominant lower castes largely contributed to its spectacular victory. The book captures the 'unequal political playing ground' with BJP's mammoth financial power over other opposition parties, using of central agencies against opposition leaders, largely conformist media houses favouring BJP and leniency of the Election Commission towards the ruling party in certain instances, impacted India's political landscape. Last section of this part captures that during Modi's second tenure, as BJP attained majority in Rajya Sabha, upper house of Indian Parliament, long-standing Hindu nationalist majoritarian agenda like abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), religious-identity based criteria to grant citizenship to refugees became laws with parliamentary approval. As BJP and its ideology became the hegemonic political force in India, several non-BJP parties got coerced or co-opted to support these laws and the saffron party has also been able to destabilise incumbent governments in states like Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh to capture power. The book notes that the scrutiny of crucial legislations by the Parliamentary Standing Committee has been bypassed and more ordinances were passed by the government in this period. The anti-CAA protests, protests in Kashmir, aftermath of Delhi riots in February 2020 witnessed state repression, instances of attempts to turn 'victims into culprits' and imprisonment of alleged 'urban naxals.' The third part ends noting that in this period, India witnessed the beginning of transformation of de facto to de jure 'Hindu Rashtra' leading to the 'invisibilisation of Indian Muslims.'

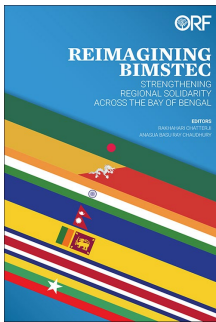
In the end the book qualifies the majoritarian-populist-authoritarianism under Modi in India as 'elected or competitive authoritarianism' as regular elections are held and popular support

remains instrumental to the regime's legitimacy and the regime acts largely within the premises of legality. So, book apprehends whether Indian people's growing concern with national security, willingness to accord unqualified obeisance to the charismatic personality of Modi or growing fear of state repression gives legitimacy to the regime. However, further needs to be explored whether the ideological pull of Hindutva has become the political common-sense of a large section of people due to BJP's effective mobilisation strategy coupled with fear, anger and hope led by Modi. Also, a thin-centred concept like populism needs to be tested further to analyse the effective political strategies of powerful regional charismatic leaders based on sub-national definition of the 'people' at least at the state level in order to understand the variants of populism shaping Indian democracy and how it is distinctive from Modi's 'national populism. Above all, in what circumstances popular disillusionment with the democratic institutions gives rise to variants of populist mobilisation in the name of the people in Indian democratic political culture, needs to be further explored.

Book Review

By

Sohini Bose *



Rakhahari Chatterji and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, eds., *Reimagining BIMSTEC: Strengthening Regional Solidarity Across the Bay of Bengal* (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, February 2021)

The growing importance of the Bay of Bengal as an integral part of the geo-strategic realm of the Indo-Pacific, has generated in recent times, a substantial amount of literature on this maritime space. While the challenges and opportunities characterizing the Bay area recurrent themes of discussion, the approach of it are usually, either a geopolitical point of view or an institutional perspective. In the case of the latter, studies on the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the regional organization exclusive to the Bay of Bengal, predominates this body of work. Formed in 1997, BIMSTEC harbored the agenda to promote economic cooperation amongst the littoral countries outlining the Bay, which were its members– namely, the countries of India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan. Over the years, BIMSTEC has only experienced horizontal expansion with its agenda being stretched over 14 diverse areas of cooperation (Trade and Investment; Technology; Energy; Transportation and Communication; Tourism; Fisheries; Agriculture; Cultural Cooperation; Environment and Disaster Management; Public Health; People-to-People Contact; Poverty Alleviation; Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime; and Climate Change), while

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vertical in-depth growth has been left wanting. As the Bay of Bengal returns to the limelight, the cobwebs are being brushed aside from this quarter-century-old mostly dormant organization, to research on its workings and prospects, so that new life may be breathed into it. Such an attempt is this volume entitled *Reimagining BIMSTEC: Strengthening Regional Solidarity Across the Bay of Bengal*, co-edited by Rakhahari Chatterji and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury; published by Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in February 2021.

Building on the deliberations which unfolded at an international conference on *Reimagining BIMSTEC*, under the purview of the Kolkata Colloquium 2019, organised by ORF in collaboration with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, ORF's Centre for New Economic Diplomacy and the UK's Department of International Development, this compendium of essays, is directed "not to promote the 'brand' of BIMSTEC, but to generate a healthy deliberation on the future of the regional body," (p. 15). In addition to the issues that were discussed at the conference, it thus explores other concerns which are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political, geo-strategic and geo-economic dimensions of BIMSTEC. Its purview and layout therefore do not mirror the sectors of cooperation as identified under BIMSTEC, as seen in most books addressing this topic. Rather, the editors sought to design the book in a way in which BIMSTEC's historical significance, its strategic future, the key areas of its cooperation and issues which it must cultivate, can be accommodated within a comprehensive volume. Consequently, the book has been divided into eight innovative sections, each with contributions from three to six authors, offering a prismatic view of the organization to the reader. A PDF version of the book is available on the ORF website at no charge.

The book begins with its first section devoted to understanding the "Historical and Cultural Linkages." This serves the twin purpose of providing a historical overview of the Bay's shared heritage—the cornerstone of BIMSTEC's regional identity, and exploring the possibilities of enhancing tourism, people-to-people contact and cultural cooperation in the region. Authors in this segment point out that BIMSTEC represents one of the few ways in which the Bay of Bengal, bifurcated into South and South East Asia, at the end of the Second World War, can be reconnected once again. However, in order to do so, people of the region, particularly leading intellectuals must engage in cultural assimilation and revive the bonds of shared heritage, as was exemplified in the words of noble laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. Development of cultural cooperation will enhance tourism between BIMSTEC member states, such as between India and Myanmar, suggests one such chapter. Overtime heritage tourism can

lead to engagement in other forms of soft power diplomacy and be expanded to include all BIMSTEC countries. However, to revive the cultural connect, for India the importance of its Northeast is paramount, as “culturally and ethnically it is a part of South East Asia” (p.57) and thus, well-suited to serve as a bridge between these two geopolitical blocs. Implementing connectivity projects in the Northeast must therefore be India’s priority, as reviving people-to-people contacts will be a trust-building exercise, which is necessary to propel BIMSTEC’s growth.

Taking a cue from the importance of connectivity in the region, the next two sections are directed towards discussions on how the region can be better connected. Section 2 thus, deals with “Connecting Nations,” while Section 3, highlighting the Bay’s maritime geography, concerns itself entirely with “Maritime Order, Connectivity and Blue Economy.” What is unusual is that in this book ‘Connectivity’ has been treated with a more elevated interpretation apart from its literal meaning concerning physical linkages. In its unique attempt, the book holds discussions on value-based connectivity grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to develop a human rights framework in the region. In favour of this argument, it has been said that BIMSTEC members are “committed to core international rights conventions and hold obligations under international human rights law,” (p.113). While this may well be the case on paper, the political realities are much different with accusations of human rights violation levied against Bangladesh for its terrorist control measure, India for the crisis in Jammu and Kashmir, and Myanmar for its Rohingya issue and the violence following the coup of February 2021. Given that BIMSTEC’s founding principle of non-interference restrains it from interfering in the internal matters of its members, such a suggestion is unlikely to materialize. Nonetheless, it is an aspiration for all democracies.

The theme of asymmetrical political, economic and developmental dynamics shaping BIMSTEC recurs throughout the book. In transport networks too, sub-optimal levels of connectivity across the different modes of transport in the Bay of Bengal region has been cited as the reason why regional integration within BIMSTEC is adversely impacted. “The political environment in the member countries drives BIMSTEC’s destiny.” Consequently, differing narratives among member states regarding China’s growing influence in the region as well as contrasting perspectives of Bangladesh and Myanmar on the Rohingya issue are bottlenecks that hinder progress. Aggravating the situation is the organization’s own stupor, summed up in its lack of authority, funds and even entrepreneurship. If any headway is to be made, there is

need for BIMSTEC's cooperation to percolate into the private sectors, harmonization of standards and custom procedures, upgradation of trade-related infrastructure at borders, cultivation of a common communication strategy and policy integration amongst member states to attract investments from global funding agencies. A hitherto unfamiliar territory for BIMSTEC in this domain includes digital connectivity, which finds a place for itself in this book, adding to its value in the pandemic world. On matters maritime, the book offers insights on developing coastal shipping, improving port infrastructure and the significance of the transshipment hub at Colombo, Sri Lanka. Shipping is an important segment of the Blue Economy, although the latter is unlikely to flourish in the Bay unless member states harmonize their strategies of balancing economic prosperity and ecosystem conservation with one another. Of course, in the Bay any development in the maritime or coastal sector is impossible without attending to the problem of natural disasters.

Accordingly, Section 4 on "Climate Change and Disaster Management," explores many facets of this reigning concern in the ever-turbulent Bay of Bengal. Infamous for its tempestuousness, cyclones and tsunamis of the Bay frequently wreak havoc on its coasts, while the mountainous regions experience earthquakes and landslides, the impacts of which are exacerbated by climate change. Addressing climate change 'adaptation' in place of mitigation has been favoured as a measure that delivers immediate results. The importance of 'strategic retreat' from the vulnerable coastlines after careful consideration of the 'at-risk communities', has also been emphasized upon with examples from the Bangladesh model. The focus is more on climate change rather than on disaster management as one chapter among the three in this segment, is dedicated to addressing this issue. Herein too, the vision is long-term, calling for a shift from managing disasters to managing disaster risks, which is necessary given that the concern demands long-term solutions. Nonetheless, it leaves room for more contemplation on the questions of disaster preparedness and response, which although short-term, are more immediate concerns with a direct bearing upon saving human lives.

Emphasizing this human factor is Section 5 "Analysing Human Capital", one of the very innovative aspects of this book, highlighting some issues hitherto unexplored by BIMSTEC; education and gender. True to the COVID-19 era, the segment opens with a chapter examining the organization's health futures and closes with one dedicated to the challenges COVID-19 and the changing geopolitical order poses to BIMSTEC. Key takeaways are; need to engage members in cross-learning the best practices, reduce sectors for greater focus on

economic revival, building a pool of health workers and training in digital methods. Beyond health, 'Education' has been highlighted as an area demanding attention for it can "play a transformative role in ... creating closer and more constructive regional links," (p.203). Gender issues are also an important area of consideration, as is the problem of the trafficking of women. Its absence from BIMSTEC's agenda reveals major lacunae in the organization, as without 'gender' sensitivity, progress remains skewed. As a result, although BIMSTEC has a sector on countering transnational crimes, no steps have been taken to battle women trafficking, despite it being a growing concern. This section is indeed an eye-opener, and a rarity in most books that are based on BIMSTEC.

Moving on from issues that remain untouched to an issue responsible for BIMSTEC's formation- "Enhancing Trade", comes to be covered in Section 6. Although this is one of the most important areas of cooperation for BIMSTEC, trade amongst the member countries remains low and the Free Trade Agreement is yet to be fleshed out. There is a dearth of demand and hence there is need to mobilize economic diplomacy to attract Foreign Direct Investment, promote export trade, strengthen multi-modal connectivity and forge a better investment and business climate. But this is only possible if the members move collectively as a bloc to achieve the SDGs. After all, economic development must be inclusive, linked to social justice, and conscious of environmental conditions. It has also been opined that Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can serve as an inspiration to BIMSTEC in terms of trade-related growth. Overtime, this may even contrive to a multi-regional cooperation between the two organizations to broaden BIMSTEC's purview. However, such a partnership seems unlikely until the former becomes more credible in offering multilateral benefits to ASEAN, presently found unattainable from its bilateral ties with South Asian countries.

Indeed, to make sense of BIMSTEC's future prospects it is necessary to place it within the wider geopolitical context. Thus, in Section 7, the book adjusts its lens on "The Indo-Pacific." In this newly emerging geo-strategic construct, the Bay of Bengal finds itself geographically central, with its littorals keen for re-engagement. The lack of major disputes between these countries makes the political environment vastly suitable for regional integration although the moment is fast slipping away as rivalries begin to surface in the Bay's waters. However, apprehensions stemming from extra-regional powers such as China's assertive rise in the region, may yet unite the BIMSTEC countries with the same assertiveness towards a regional response. If bonds within it are adequately strengthened, it can fuel other sub-regional networks.

The key for BIMSTEC itself to consolidate its membership would be to nurture the concept of a Bay of Bengal Community—an essence of belongingness in the region embellished with practical functionality. To this end, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore; countries sharing this maritime space; may be made ‘Observers’ to the organization, thereby creating ‘BIMSTEC Plus’. But whether they would be willing, depends on their perception of this organization.

The true manufacturer of perception or ‘agenda setter’ in a democracy is its fourth pillar. Hence, to gauge the actual receptivity of BIMSTEC among its member states, it is important to articulate the “Voices From Media”—Section 8, the last and most unique segment of this volume. The chapters although authored by journalists from the various member states interestingly echo very similar thoughts. The media can certainly play a complementary role in spreading awareness about the organization, however if there is little occurring to report, the media has no choice but to sideline BIMSTEC. Regularly apprizing the media of the organization’s developments and training media professionals to have a more regional people-centric approach is also necessary. Investments must also be made in digital media, a forum fast becoming popular. Also, the BIMSTEC Secretariat itself must engage in online information sharing. Frequent positive updates by the media will generate public trust towards BIMSTEC.

To conclude, it may be observed that this book offers a range of ideas on BIMSTEC, old and new, to rejuvenate it, thereby fully justifying the title *‘Reimagining BIMSTEC’*. It is a comprehensive compendium, useful for policy makers, researchers and students seeking a quick glance at BIMSTEC’s prospects. Assuredly, some issues such as the institutional and decision-making structure of BIMSTEC, growing importance of traditional security concerns and counter terrorism and transnational crimes in the Bay, except women trafficking, have not been dealt with. However, this is not a critique of the book as it is rarely possible to encapsulate all the issues in one volume. Rather, a second volume on ‘BIMSTEC reimagined’ is indicated, especially as BIMSTEC has finally adopted its Charter and regrouped its fourteen sectors of cooperation into seven broad concerns, at its Fifth Summit Meeting, held on March 30th, 2022.

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