

Assam Accord: Lack of strong political will

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Since the signing of the historic Assam Accord on August 15, 1985, by the Central and State Governments and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), the rhetoric of its implementation has been a long drawn process. It is an irony that even after 36 years of its inception, its implementation seems quite arduous and troublesome. In fact, the failure in implementing the Accord in letter and spirit speaks of the lack of strong political will on the part of the successive Governments, both at the Centre and in the State. As the Accord stands in favour of safeguarding the indigenous people, and given the crisis felt in indigenous and ethnic identity, there is no logic in turning a deaf ear to its prompt implementation.

It is known to all that the Assam Accord, an offshoot of the six-year-long Assam Agitation (1979-85), is very much concerned with detecting and deporting foreign nationals, who keep exerting far-reaching impacts upon the demographic as well as social, political and economic contours of the State. Unprecedented immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh has taken such a turn that the indigenous people are very much close to getting minority status in a few bordering districts of the State. To curb the menace, complete sealing of the international border, proper update of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), introduction of the Inner Line Permit system, detection and

deportation of the now present foreign nationals, proper monitoring of the border, and above all, materialization of adequate work culture could have been the deserving steps, which, unfortunately, seem to be far away. There is hardly any concerted effort in checking illegal migration and detecting of foreign nationals, who stay all along, putting undue pressure upon the land and demography in the State.

The formation of an eight-member committee involving three Cabinet ministers and five members of the AASU seems to carry some hope as far as implementation of the Accord is concerned. It is through discussion and means of negotiation that the committee would strive to frame an acceptable ground for implementation of various clauses of the Accord. However, the process is not as easy as it looks at face value.

The major issue is definitely the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, which is strongly opposed by the AASU and most of the organizations from the Northeast. As the controversial Act intends to accord citizenship to people from the minority communities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan entering India before December 31, 2014, it may lead to a sea change, but for the worst. In fact, judging people on the basis of

religion would initiate polarity, in which the prospect of peaceful living would no more be possible. In a truly secular and democratic set-up, preferring one particular religion at the cost of the rest would flare up discontent among the people. With the Act keeping off a few Northeastern states, the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), and the Sixth Schedule areas, any move towards implementing it bears the possibility of affecting the sentiments of the people. Under these

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circumstances, the AASU, like any other organization, would never accept the Act.

The AASU's uncompromising stand on March 25, 1971 as the cut-off year in recognizing the foreign nationals is in sharp contrast to the Government's move towards implementing the CAA. Owing to this, the prospect of having an effective talk between

the two parties does not seem so much convincing. The anti-CAA agitation, which lost its momentum in view of the Covid-19 pandemic, is also likely to be launched once again as the Act has completed two years since it came into effect on December 12, 2019. Like the AASU, most of the other organizations, including the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP), Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), Rajior Dal, North East Students' Organization (NESO), among others, are at the forefront to wage a relentless stir against the Act. The repeal of the three contentious farm laws by the Centre as a result of a year-long protest by farmers may be an added boost in spearheading the anti-CAA agitation in the State. If the year-long agitation waged by the farmers succeeds in the long run, the campaigners against the CAA would leave no stone unturned in revoking the contentious Act.

In the tug of war between the Government and the AASU over the controversial CAA, implementation of the Assam Accord faces a Herculean task. Moreover, the AASU's adherence to Clause 6 of the Accord, which envisages Constitutional safeguard to the 'Assamese people', is also debatable, as the definition of 'Assamese' becomes problematic, with various

ethnic groups showing interest in having a distinctive, but separate identity. That the so-called mainstream Assamese society does not treat all the ethnic groups equally is what is assumed, and the concerned groups show their reluctance in continuing rapport with the dominant class. Instead, they like to scale their unique identity in a purely essentialist and monolithic conditioning. In a run-up to this agenda, they do not mind going against the interest of the nation as well. Against this backdrop, the idea of having a solid and unified platform for the greater 'Assamese people' hardly holds water. Taking all this into account, there is less possibility in respect of implementing the Accord. But letting the Accord go with no trace of implementation would devalue its historical context and also the sentiment that the people in the State usually nurture over the Accord.

Although proper implementation is imbued with much difficulty, a prompt response to the perennial issues like land rights of the indigenous people, protection of language and culture, conceivable solution to flood and erosion, and also the problem of unemployment, introduction of the Inner Line Permit, activation of the proposed 200 Foreigners' Tribunals, industrialization, among others, would, at least, come close to the spirit of the Accord. An amicable solution to the problems being faced in the State would definitely stand in consonant with what the Accord has been championing since its inception.