



IMPEDIMENTS IMPAIRING GROWTH IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT:

Assam, a state situated in the extreme North-Eastern region of India presents a paradoxical picture of backwardness and poverty in the midst of immense natural wealth. Nearly 39% of the state's population lives below the poverty line. Poverty is more visible among the small and marginal farmers, tribal and non-tribal peasants, immigrants working on daily-wage basis, agricultural laborer's etc. The districts mainly inflicted by poverty are Dhubri, Darrang, Dhemaji, Sonitpur, Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi etc.

Several factors are responsible for poverty conditions in the state. Assam is a geographically isolated state. This fact along with its fragmentation since independence has resulted in marked disruption and economic backwardness and hence poverty. Besides this, heavy pressure of population in the state has resulted in an increased burden on land, a decline in per capita income and hence poverty.

Increase in population does not directly result in poverty. But there are certain negative features which characterize the state's population, and this has resulted in poverty conditions in the state. Dependency ratio is very high in the state. Besides heavy influx of immigrants in the state from the neighboring countries and internal migration has disrupted the land man ratio to such an extent that the percentage of Assamese population has today become insignificant. The immigrants have become a big burden on its government and its people. This is because the Assamese people has to share the scarce resources and welfare facilities with the immigrants whereas the latter have not been substantially contributing to an increase in the wealth of the state. In other words, the rate of population increase has exceeded production, and this has resulted in poor economic growth and hence poverty. Excessive dependence of the people of Assam on land has also contributed to the rise of rural poverty. Mounting pressure of population on land resulting in its fragmentation, failure of land reforms to protect the rural poor, absence of adequate credit facilities and the resultant inability of the farmers to use improved inputs has resulted in lower productivity, lower income and hence more of poverty. The situation could have improved if the state had a strong industrial base. But even the industries of Assam are not in a position to provide an alternative to the people who flock to the urban areas in search of livelihood. Because of various inhibiting factors the industrial sector of the state continues to operate on tradition basis resulting in low productivity and lop-sided industrial development. Such conditions increase the sufferings of the common man, and his level of living deteriorates.

Assam's economy, because of being exposed to the worst forms of natural calamities (recurring floods every year, problem of soil erosion, occasional drought), has also resulted in poor economic conditions. These calamities cause extensive losses to the small farmers and have retarded economic growth. It is a pity that the government has not at all been serious in tackling these natural disasters. Another factor contributing to poverty in the state is the absence of adequate infrastructural facilities. In the absence of improved transport and communication facilities there is also less diffusion of ideas and technology and low mobility of people, goods, and ideas. The result is stagnation and a situation where people get trapped in a vicious circle of poverty. Dismal power situation in the state has forced industrial units to incur heavy financial losses. This obviously means low wages for the workers or an increase in the problem of unemployment. Ineffective functioning of the financial institutions in the state has also hindered economic progress in the state. The condition has been worsened by the fact that educational arrangements in the state have failed to supply the skilled personnel required for diverse economic activities. Under such conditions the quality and quantity of output suffer. Low production is obviously associated with low income and hence poverty.

The colonial nature of Assam's economy has also heightened poverty conditions in the state. The state's economy is dominated by those industries (oil, tea, timber) which were set up by the British rulers. Lack of industrial diversification has posed a serious problem because the existing industries are manned at all levels by personnel other than the local Assamese who remit their incomes to their homes outside the state. The spin off effects of the industries is thus lost. Moreover, absence of a capitalist culture in the entire process of industrialization and in the agricultural sector as well, has made poverty a common phenomenon in the state. The inefficient functioning of the state government is also to be blamed for increasing poverty conditions in the state. Government personnel take decisions without considering the requirement of the schemes. As such irrelevant decisions are taken which do not help any specific group of the rural poor. Lack of coordination between the administrative agencies and lack of any appropriate planning strategy has created a situation where the entire development process has become a farce. Inbuilt deficiencies in the planning strategy have resulted in wasteful expenditure and an increased burden on the state. Involvement of the people in the development process is negligible. This is particularly true in the case of rural development schemes where the bureaucrats continue to hold their sway. Absence of active involvement of the people in the grassroots bodies have resulted in negation of development of the farming sector. Land reforms have been only partially implemented thus worsening the situation. The Central government has also failed to extend assistance to the state. Though the Union government cannot be blamed for poverty conditions in any state but inadequate and reduced central allocations would adversely affect the economic growth and development of the states and this has been witnessed in the case of Assam. It is ironical that development projects in Assam are usually delayed. For instance, a new bridge over the Brahmaputra River has been the result of long years of struggle and agitation by the local Assamese. Such a negligent outlook by the centre has adversely affected the economy of the state. The consequence is that the people are compelled to lead their lives under poverty and deprivation.

KEY WORDS:

poverty, population, backwardness, modernization, immigration, fragmentation, low-productivity, scarcity, demography, deprivation, tenants, land reforms, education, sharecroppers, exploitation, neglect, economy, flood, cultivation.

INTRODUCTION:

Among all the states of the Indian Union, Assam stands out as one of the most enchanting and strategically crucial state blessed with diverse and abundant natural wealth. But the abundant natural resources failed to give economic boost to the state, which is economically one of the most backward states of the Union. A region endowed with vast natural resources promises high economic growth rate and modernisation. But the State of Assam situated in the extreme North-Eastern region of India stands as an exception. In spite of its rich resources, (as is manifested in the abundant availability of crude oil, tea, coal, natural gas etc.) it presents a paradoxical picture of backwardness and poverty in the midst of immense natural wealth. More than eighty percent of the State's population reside in the rural areas. As such its poverty is of a rural nature and is mainly concentrated among the small farmers, tea garden labourers, the tribal and non-tribal peasants, immigrants working on a daily wage basis, agricultural labourers etc. The districts particularly afflicted by poverty are Dhubri, Darrang, Dhemaji, Sonitpur, Cachar, Karimganj, Hai Lakandi and Karbi-Anglong.

AIM OF THE STUDY:

Assam is one of the most captivating and strategically crucial states of our country with abundance of natural resources. The state is known for lavish supplies of tea. Crude oil, coal and natural gas are also available in abundance. Despite that Assam is an economically backward state as compared to other states of the Union. Literature on Assam concentrates on its history, culture, and society. As such the common readers generally associate the state with its cultural and societal specificities. Scanty literature has been produced highlighting the paradox of its vast economic potential and the existing penurious economic condition. Books depicting an in-depth study of its economic and poverty conditions are rare to find. Hardly any attempt has been made to analyze the interplay of factors resulting into economic backwardness of the state, which forces majority of its people to live in condition of distress and poverty. Present work is an attempt to fill this void.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

1. Das A.K., "Assam's Agony – A Socio Economic and Political Analysis", (Lancers Publishers, New Delhi, 1983). This book as the name suggests is a detail study of the socio-economic problems which have plagued the state of Assam since ages. The political aspect has also been probed and how the political system has dealt with the issues relating to social issues and economic problems have also been analysed.
2. Dhar P.K., "The Economy of Assam" (Kalyani Publishers, New Delhi, 1995)
This book by P.K. Dhar deals with a detail analysis of the economy of Assam and its related components. The nature of agriculture and industrial growth and development over the years have also been discussed. The condition and circumstances and the inhibitory factors of the economic growth of Assam has been carefully taken into consideration.
3. Gait E.A., "History of Assam" (Thacker Spink and Co., Calcutta 1906).
The nature of any society can be rationally judged when placed in a historical context as every society has its roots in its historical past. The above book as such gives a historical perspective of the society of Assam, its past rulers and the nature of society prevalent during the Ahom rulers. It is a treasure house of knowledge as far as the evolution of the Assamese society and culture is concerned.

4. Mali D.D. & P. Deka, "Industrial Development in North-East India". (Om Sons Publications, New Delhi, 1987).

The joint authors of the above book deals with the complex problems and prospects involved in the growth of small-scale industries which comprise the crucial component of the industrial landscape of Assam and is a source of livelihood for many particularly in the rural areas. The author of this book identifies and discusses issues relating to modernization in the context of the overall development of the region.

5. Peter Townsend (ed.) "The Concept of Poverty" (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1979).

The above book on the concept of poverty as the name suggests is a detail investigation of the various aspects of poverty, the lifestyle of the poorest and also the causes of inequality existing in various societies. Analysis of the concepts related to poverty is the focus of this book.

6. Piscatory Sangeeta Barooah, "Assam – The Accord, The Discord," (Penguin Random House, India).

This is a marvelous book on the nature of society, economy and politics related issues of Assam. It highlights the fact that all the three facets are inter-related and can be understood only in relation to one another. It also studies the pattern of demographic changes of Assam because of the issue of immigration/migration and how it ultimately led to turmoil in the State culminating in the Assam Accord.

7. Saikia Rajan, "Social and Economic History of Assam, 1853-1921 (Manohar Publications 2002).

The above book by Rajan Saikia studies in detail the causes and conditions contributing to the decline of the old ruling class in Assam and how alongwith it there was a complete decline in the cottage and traditional industries of the State. This book would help us to understand the root of the problem of poverty particularly in the rural areas where these industries mainly survive.

MAIN TEXT:

Poverty in Assam is not the result of a particular cause. A number of factors have combined together to produce such a situation. Assam a land locked state is geographically isolated from the rest of India. Its sole link with the country is through a narrow corridor in West Bengal. This along with its fragmentation since independence has resulted in political disruption and economic backwardness and hence poverty. With Sylhet being transferred to East Pakistan in 1947, Assam lost vast paddy lands along with the former's tea, lime, and cement industries. The separation of Meghalaya and the resultant loss of Shillong had also reduced the prestige of Assam in the eyes of the nation. Along with this is the natural division of the State into two distinct regions, the plain areas and the hill areas, both of which maintain any independent existence. This has inhibited the State from expeditiously carrying out integrated development plans with much of its wealth lying untapped. Assam has been experiencing a tremendous demographic pressure since the past few decades. Such an abnormal growth of population can be attributed not as much to natural growth as to the unabated influx of illegal migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal as well as inter-state migration. However, increase in population does not directly result in poverty. It is only when population exceed production that whatever little development takes place is quickly absorbed by the excessive population. This is what has happened in Assam. The average density of population per sq. km. is much higher than all India level. This does not mean that the State has better earning opportunities, but it adversely means a burden on land, decrease

in per capita income and hence poverty. Infact, domination of Assam's economy by the rural sector itself means overall low productivity. The economy of Assam is a rural one. Rapid rise in population would mean a greater pressure on land which more or less remains fixed. For a poor economy like that of Assam inadequate capital formation and lack of large-scale irrigational facilities combined with heavy concentration of population has resulted in low rate of earnings, low per capita income and hence poverty. In other words, a high rate of population growth has retarded the process of capital formation so essential for economic growth. Finally, the pressure of population has increased the demand for food products in the State because the area under cultivation could not be increased simultaneously. Greater demand meant more prices for food items, less of savings and hence poverty conditions in the State.

Immigration and internal migration to Assam which was economically desired by the British prior to independence for the fulfilment of their plans and which continued even after partition, have led to grave economic deprivation of the State and to its people. Several decades of immigration have contributed to a decline in the land man ratio as the new immigrants did nothing to increase the wealth of the State. But by virtue of their inherent superiority in different economic activities they were able to economically deprive the local Assamese population of control over the primary sector of the economy, which virtually passed into the hands of the then East Bengal cultivators. With new settlements of immigrants, the average size of agricultural holdings become drastically smaller. Wastelands and fallow lands were now encroached upon to supplement their meagre incomes from tea garden employment. In course of time with growing economic security the migrants not only gained control over lands in the traditional tribal areas but also manipulated the middle-class jobs in the State. The native Assamese were thus pushed to the background and there began "a silent war for space between the Bengali Hindu refugees and the land hungry poor Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh."¹ Scarcity of fertile cultivable lands also prompted the immigrants to occupy the resourceful hill tracts, forests lands and the public grazing lands for which there were no private owners. Subsequently as they began to avail the new educational facilities, they became averse to becoming cultivators or taking up other manual jobs. They began competing for the limited availability of white-collar jobs which resulted in a severe imbalance in the economy, more particularly in the urban areas. The inflow of immigrants also created certain other problems for rural Assam. A large number of Nepali immigrants proficient in cleaning jungles for livestock farming began an unplanned destruction of forests in the outskirts of the urban areas of the State. This created problems of soil conservation which adversely affected agricultural prospects in the plain areas and when this happens in the case of an economy which is dominated by the rural sector, its economic conditions further deteriorate. The immigrants also gained effective control over the secondary sector and their numbers have been growing over the years. The trade commercial and industrial leadership have been practically monopolized by the numerically small but influential Marwaris who in due course also gained control over most of the sterling tea companies. Moreover, the middle-class immigrants who had professional skills strove for competitive employment opportunities in the administration and other public service departments and were more successful than their indigenous counter parts. The immigrants by exercising a dominant control over the economy of the State has become a big burden on its government and its people. This is because the people of Assam are having to share its scarce resources and welfare facilities with the immigrants whose control over the economy has become deep-rooted by virtue of their numbers.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the people of Assam. As the State is an industrially backward one there is an increasing pressure of population on land. This mounting pressure on land has resulted in fragmentation and subdivision of holdings, inability of the farmers to use improved inputs and thus lower and lower productivity. Unsuccessful implementation of land reforms in Assam have failed to protect the rural poor, the tenants and the sharecroppers with the result that the number of daily wage earners have increased. Cases of land alienation by the immigrant peasants from the indigenous ones are common particularly in the tribal areas. Thus, in the absence of land, their basic possession, the peasants are deprived of their source of income and food resulting in their low standard of living and a strengthening of their poverty conditions. Another agricultural weakness which makes the rural poor all the poorer is the absence of adequate credit facilities. Absence of institutional finance forces the poor farmers, to borrow from the money lenders who takes full advantage of their poor bargaining power and exploits them. Absence of adequate agricultural support programmes also makes the farmers poor in the State. Agricultural products perishes soon and the small cultivator with no holding capacity is forced to dispose his produce immediately after harvest even if the selling rate turns out to be unprofitable. A bumper harvest under such conditions proves to be a curse for him. Thus because of the absence of proper infra structural arrangements the farmer in the State of Assam is not able to procure adequate price for his output and hence he is unable to free himself from the trap of poverty. Assam's economy is faced with a serious problem of capital deficiency. Inadequacy of finance has assumed serious proportion in the State because its economy is dominated by the agricultural and small business sector. Moreover, the government is also not in a position (due to natural and other factors) to implement development plans on its own. Because of low per capita income in the State the rate of savings is also very low. This can also be partially explained by the fact that the migrants in the State (who constitute a significant portion of its population) remits a major portion of their income outside Assam. Such out-flows of capital have put a tremendous pressure on the State's exchequer, and this has made the pace of development slower. A rapid growth of population, as seen earlier, by appropriating the modest increases in state income also hampers the process of capital formation.

Poor industrial growth in any state does not directly result in poverty. But its importance in the context of poverty lies in the fact that it creates economic ills like unemployment and low productivity which in turn increases poverty conditions. Such a situation becomes all the more acute in a State like Assam where the rural sector is an overburdened one and the industries are not in a position to absorb more people who flock to the urban areas in search of livelihood. Numerous factors have hindered the growth of industries in Assam. Associated with these problems is the problem of the lack of industrial tradition in the State. This is because during the first few decades of planning more importance was attached to the agricultural sector. Moreover, for the past few decades a prolonged agitational environment has generated indiscipline and unproductivity particularly in the public sector units causing sufferings for the daily wage earners and for the common people who are then compelled to buy goods coming from other States at a higher price. The condition of small-scale industries in the State is no better. Assam has a tradition of rural based cottage industry, handloom, sericulture industry etc. but as they continue to remain in the category of the unorganized sector they continue to function on traditional and unscientific lines. This affects the quantity and quality of their output with the result that the people associated with the small-scale units do not get adequate remuneration for their output. Peasants' agriculture, the core sector of Assam's economy still being untouched by modern technology is boldly exposed to some of the worst forms of natural calamities. Rainfall in Assam depicts an erratic behavior. Heavy rainfall during monsoon results in floods while precipitation during the rest of the year often

proves inadequate to cater to the requirements of the rabi crops. At times even during the monsoon months long dry spell occurs resulting in drought. Recurring floods have been a major constraint to the economic development of the state as they not only take a heavy toll in terms of life and property but also cause extensive damages to standing crops. The problems become all the more acute as the peasants of Assam are traditionally Kharif crop cultivators and such crops are the victims of summer floods. Assam has become chronically a flood affected state and its spread and intensity appear to be increasing every year. Constant dread of the flood ravage has given birth to a spirit of depression and hopelessness among the poor cultivators as they cannot look forward to an assured harvest. The perennial problem of floods has destroyed the economy of the state as the overall damages caused by floods run into crores of rupees every year. The severity of the problem has still been persisting as the state and more significantly the Central Government have not taken any permanent measure to save the state from the losses caused by the fury of floods. Erosion of soil particularly by the river Brahmaputra on both banks constitute another “inhibitory physical factor faced by the peasant agriculture in Assam”.² With the recession of floods every year large tracts of fertile agricultural land are eroded causing severe distress to the poor peasants. Because of its peculiar terrain and the shifting cultivation practiced in the hill regions of Assam there is widespread soil erosion in the entire State. Soil erosion is more acute in the plains as intensive rainfall strikes the land surface more forcefully, thereby making the soil particles loose enough to be washed away easily. The problem of erosion over the years has assumed a dangerous proportion as thousands of Assam’s rural population, specially those depending on fishing for their livelihood and residing in the riverbanks become permanently homeless. The government also finds it burdensome to allot them necessary lands thus compelling it to step up its rehabilitation expenses. Depletion of vegetation resulting from deforestation constitutes another factor responsible for soil erosion at an increasing pace. Too much soil erosion has silted the rivers and streams thus decreasing the water carrying capacity of the rivers resulting in additional floods. Drought is another inhibitory physical factor adversely affecting Assam’s agriculture. It is more injurious to agriculture than flood as its ill effects is felt in diverse aspects of the peasant’s life. Agricultural production is also lowered due to a large number of crop diseases in the State resulting from continuous cloudy weather during summer when rice is grown through out the state. Weeds, insects and also menacing pests impair the quality of crop production. Thus, the enervating influence of nature has severely handicapped the State’s natural environment.

The conditions for the economic growth of Assam are quite propitious but the economic order in Assam has remained essentially colonial. The cause of the backwardness can be traced to the period of British colonialism in the 19th century which marked Assam’s entry into the modern industrial age. For the British Assam proved to be a source of wealth which could be plundered and exploited for their own benefit irrespective of the well being of the local population. The stranglehold of foreign capital on the State’s natural resources led to the establishment of a massive tea plantation economy and oil producing centers. But unfortunately, “there has been no synthesis between the traditional agricultural economy of the rural peasants, artisans and traders with that of the industrial economy”³. This is because of the fact that though Assam produces more than 50% of the country’s tea it is sent outside the state for sale. The registered offices of the larger tea companies are located in Calcutta, and they adopt schemes and projects in total disregard of Assam’s economic growth. This dual economy pattern resulting in a dichotomy in Assam’s economic system still lingers on.

The economy of the State is still dominated by tea oil and timber industries which have limited spin off for the growth of local enterprises. The wages of the migrant labourers are

remitted to their homes outside the state. The top management in the Calcutta based companies import managerial recruits from States other than Assam. As such the local trained youth of Assam are denied job opportunities in the tea industries. The effects of this colonial legacy still persist today to the extent that the railway system so vital for the State's development continue to pass through dense jungles while leaving the potentially rich areas on the south and north banks of the Brahmaputra and other commercial towns untouched. This was the making of the colonial rulers whose primary motive was to connect the tea estates with the colonial capitalist's world economy. The state thus continues to lag far behind the rest of the nation. Besides the income generated within the state mostly leaking out of it, another factor contributing to the State's backwardness and hence poverty is the presence of a dualistic economy within it, the first being the market economy characterizing the towns and the nearby areas and the second being the subsistence economy prevalent in the village areas. The problem is accentuated by the fact that the labour force working in the externally directed oil fields, coal fields and the tea estates spends a major portion of their income on consumer goods brought from outside the State. Besides this, Assam's economy still continues to preserve some of the characteristics of a tribal economy such as absence of surplus, predominance of food productions, and absence of profit motive. This is because of the partial success achieved by the economic plans in their efforts to transform large segments of the State's economy from the primitive to the capitalist at the time of independence and thereby hasten the pace of economic development. Even today the large and medium industries or business houses do not reveal any inclination to help the small and rural sector. As such the predominant rural sector of the State remains backward and feeble and in the absence of any linkage with the modern sector, it continues to be a deterrent to the overall economic progress. Lack of an all-pervading industrial culture in the state has made Assam's economy predominantly an agricultural one. There has not only been an acute paucity of local investible funds for the industrial sector but even the outside capitalists have been reluctant to invest in the State due to its vulnerable geographical location. Thus, rural poverty in Assam has assumed a chronic form. This condition has been persisting as the people have started thriving in an equilibrium of poverty. Another factor contributing to the economic backwardness of the State is the absence of adequate infrastructural facilities so vital in strengthening the growth base of the region. A well-developed transport and communication system is a prerequisite for rapid economic growth. But its inadequacy continues to act as an impediment to the economic progress of the State. Even after more than four decades of independence Assam lags behind in developing communication linkages with the rest of the country as is manifested by the total dominance of the State on the very expensive road transport system for the transfer of goods to and from the State. But the condition of the roads because of frequent damages by floods, existence of weak bridges and narrow lanes, are not up to the mark. Several villages still remain unconnected with ordinary unmetalled roads. Whatever roads are being constructed have had an adverse impact on the rural society as by transporting luxury items of an urban standard, it has been encouraging the poor peasants to become urban imitators without clinging to the soil for any substantial income. This false notion of modernity has been proving a threat to the rural economy. The topography of Assam has also made the construction of roads very difficult. Floods have also been causing irreparable damages to the roads. But the amount allocated for transport has been highly inadequate. Most of the State's national highways still have to manage dangerously with timber bridges. The construction of the broad-gauge lines beyond Guwahati was being delayed due to paucity of funds. Moreover, the operating conditions of the railways have also not been good and sufficient because of frequent landslides in the hilly regions and the breaches caused by floods. Considering, the increasing demand, the air traffic is also inadequate. Telecommunication and postal services are also affected due to the natural

hazards. Over the years such inadequate facilities have also been marred by frequent political uprisings involving frequent bandhs and strike. But in the absence of improved means of transport, Assam suffers from stagnation and is trapped in a vicious circle of poverty. Another infrastructural weakness constitutes the dismal power structure which in turn has cast a shadow of gloom in all spheres of the State's economic activity. Poor infrastructure has caused the major industrial units to incur heavy financial losses. Numerous small industries, unable to cope up with inadequate power supply, had to close down. Under such conditions either the workers are compelled to work with low wages, or they become unemployed. As such a large section of the workers lose their source of income and join the ranks of the poor. Another infrastructural constraint is in regard to education. Educational arrangements in Assam have failed to supply the skilled manpower required for industry, agriculture, and other diverse activities. There is only a handful of educational institutions imparting training in agricultural and allied activities specially for the actual tiller. The State lacks in skilled manpower who can work for projects in different sectors. There is also the absence of technical manpower who can engage in technical research and the extension works. Slackening of technical researchers hampering productive activities has been the result of inadequate turn out from the existing engineering colleges in the State. An indifferent attitude of the State Government has resulted in the people of Assam remaining ignorant about the skills and techniques of modern economic management and other modern schemes of entrepreneurial development and management training. Emphasis of management education till date has been on the large-scale industries which ironically enough contributes a marginal percentage to the total State income. The medium and small-scale industries which are more in need of technical and marginal education become victims of mismanagement under such circumstances. Finally, another infrastructural weakness has to do with the poor health of the peasants which results in low production, low income and hence poverty. Medical facilities, though have improved over the years, are concentrated as far as the rural areas are concerned merely on eradicating the epidemics rather than improving the physical strength and vitality of the rural population which in turn could have partially solved the problem.

Inadequacy of marketing facilities is another factor for the backwardness of the state leading to other numerous problems. "Marketing infrastructure is not properly developed due to poor investment in basic infrastructure such as roads, transportation, cold storage facilities, rural godowns and processing facilities as also due to poor regulation of marketing".⁴ The existing market situation is highly exploitative in nature as it is characterized by multiplicity of weights and measures, adulteration, absence of grading of products and so on. Such a situation when combined with the transport bottlenecks hinders the free movement of goods within the state. This creates a situation of artificial scarcity of the already limited availability of essential commodities leading to general price-rise in the state. Assam has indeed become a flourishing market for industrial products of other states of India. As such it has mostly become a consumer state having to depend on outside sources for most of its primary commodities. Thus, the prices of these commodities are determined by the rate settled at the sources of production and supply of these goods. Assam is also a food deficit State. Recurrence of floods and droughts nearly every year combined with the use of out-mode technology has resulted in stagnancy in agriculture. Relentless growth in population and the continuous rise in the demand for food grains, have resulted in a huge gap between demand and supply. Over the years there has been a significant increase in the production of food grains, but the per capita net availability has witnessed a declining trend. Lack of adequate resources has made agriculture in Assam a victim of low input and low output technology. Moreover, as the State must depend on the outside sources for the procurement of essential food items, disruption of communication during the summer floods presents an

insurmountable hurdle for the import of food grains. But Assam's food situation is particularly unique in the sense that, though there is an abundance of cereal production, there is an acute scarcity of pulses and oilseeds. However, this surplus cannot be sustained due to high growth in population. Chronic bottleneck in the supply of essential food items reflects an overall economic stagnation, in the agricultural sector in particular and its weaknesses, creating a crisis. Administrative lacunae have also been contributing to the cause of poverty in Assam. The effective implementation of the planned schemes for development are also hampered because of the lack of orientation, accountability, and motivation of the existing political leadership. The field staff are also not exposed to the modern management method, procedures and equipments. There have also been instances of projects taken up in the State which are being executed by governmental agencies at different levels without coordinating with each other. Such shortcomings in the arena of administration have deprived the state from deriving multipurpose benefits from the existing as well as the newly set up projects. Further, in the absence of an adequate and appropriate planning strategy the state has been unable to convert the abundance of natural resources into productive use. With the exception of crude oil. Assam has not been able to utilize any of the natural raw material for its economic development. In addition to the above shortcomings, the state government's inability to check the frequent outbreak of 'bandhs' and 'hartals' have also ruined the earning opportunities of the poor to a point of no return. As such people have lost faith in its credibility. Frustration and distrust thus prevail among the people. Such a state of affairs have blocked all routes to earning any income. Another associating factor militating against the successful implementation of the State plans is the erratic rate of economic growth that has deprived all classes, of equal and continuous benefits. In certain areas the differentiated economic development of the past decades has been perpetuated by the present planning process. In the field of agriculture, the peasants practicing jhum cultivation have been facing hardships due to lack of acquaintance with modern agricultural technology. Tardy implementation of the plan schemes by the administrative agencies at various levels are also equally responsible for the overall backwardness of the state. Besides these in-built deficiencies in the planning strategy. Still another constraint in the economic development of Assam has been the lack of people's involvement in the development process. The economy of the State is predominantly rural but rural development has been entirely left in the hands of bureaucrats who do not encourage the growth of voluntary action thereby rendering the rural people helpless in a new and complex situation. The absence of active involvement of the people in the grass root institutions have resulted in a near complete negation of development. The functioning of these institutions have also been otherwise deplorable. The factors responsible for the inherent weaknesses of the cooperative societies can be attributed to the lack of adequate finance, absence of skilled manpower, lack of coordination among its various divisions etc. Defects in the formulation and implementation of land reform measures have failed to help the farmers to fruitfully develop their land resources and thus improve their standard of living. Un-availability of adequate inputs has also contributed to the ineffectiveness of the development projects. Uncertainty in the supply of inputs resulting from transport bottlenecks have made it impossible to draw up programme evaluation charts to ensure an effective and feasible coordination of various activities. Inadequate steps to mobilize the rural masses to accept new modern approach of agricultural production, have also reduced any prospects for growth in this sector. "Even the advent of the Panchayati Raj has not contributed much to rural development"⁵ There exists a gap between the theory and actual working of Panchayat in Assam. The long list of development functions assigned to these bodies exist only on paper. In the actual implementation of the community development programmes any hopes to improve the quality of the rural people were shattered because of an elite bias, bureaucratization, and unwanted reforms. The poor and marginal

farmers have thus benefitted only a bit from these programmes as the great chunk of the allotted resources are absorbed by the privileged section of the rural social structure thereby depriving the actual targets and making them all the poorer.

Conclusion:

Thus, we see that poverty in the State of Assam is not the outcome of a particular cause. Various factors have been at play in bringing about poverty conditions in the state. The importance of some factors is more than the others but the significance of none of them can be undermined. Considering the enormity of the problem, a multipronged attack to lessen the problem is thus called for. The spread of poverty conditions has engulfed nearly the entire country of which Assam constitutes an important part. A problem of such a national magnitude, therefore, calls for an immediate intervention by the Central government and has found reflection in the numerous anti-poverty schemes initiated by it. In view of persistent poverty and growing inequality, multiple approaches embodying well coordinated and definite actions must be opted for tackling the issue at hand.

Footnotes:

- 1 Baljit Rai, Demographic Aggression Against India - Muslim Avalanch from Bangladesh. (B.S. Publishes, Chandigarh, 1993), p 27.
- 2 Manamohan Das 'Peasant Agriculture in Assam: A Structural Analysis'. (Inle - India Publications, New Delhi, 1984). p. 114.
- 3 B.P. Singh, The Problem of Change - A Study of North-East India". (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987). p. 144.
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