



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

PROMOTING PEACE THROUGH DEVELOPMENT: ASSAM STATE, INDIA, 2001-2009

SYNOPSIS

When Tarun Gogoi was elected chief minister of the Indian state of Assam in 2001, the government's finances were in shambles, key public enterprises were on the verge of collapse, and two decades of violence between insurgents and the police and armed forces had created deep insecurity among the citizenry. The main insurgent group, the United Liberation Front of Asom, continued to threaten the state's ability to govern the countryside. Faced with poverty and insurgency, with the former often feeding the latter, Gogoi set development ahead of peace-building on his list of priorities for the initial years of his tenure in office. But before development could be addressed, he had to fix the government's finances. Gogoi assembled a team of young ministers to spearhead his reform efforts and appointed talented civil servants to senior positions in important departments such as finance and home affairs. Together, these individuals were able to augment the state's financial base, make spending more efficient, turn around ailing public agencies and devolve power to newly created autonomous councils to address the demands of ethnic groups. As his state's finances improved, Gogoi began working to lower the hurdles posed by insurgent groups through a two-pronged approach. He aimed to defeat insurgent groups militarily while trying to shift public support from the insurgents to the government. Assam's reform story unfolded "gradually, gradually," in Gogoi's words, and it contains important lessons in financial management and conflict resolution. Assam was an interesting case of development forming a vital part of a strategy to reduce conflict and create the space for further development.

Roban Mukherjee drafted this policy note on the basis of interviews conducted in Guwahati city, Assam's capital, in July 2009.

INTRODUCTION

Perched atop a small hill on the outskirts of Guwahati, the chief minister's residence is a modest structure, encircled by trees and secluded from the bustling city below. In mid-2009 its main occupant, 73-year-old Tarun Gogoi, fit

well with his surroundings. A veteran of the Indian National Congress party, Gogoi was often considered an unassuming man with a pleasant disposition,¹ somewhat aloof from Assamese politics. Beneath his grandfatherly exterior, however, Gogoi was an energetic

politician with skill and acumen rarely matched by his contemporaries. He was the only chief minister in Assam's 63-year history to win a second consecutive term. When he first came to power in 2001, he chose to reform government institutions in a gradual manner. Three years into his second five-year term as chief minister, in mid-2009 Gogoi could look back with a sense of achievement at how far Assam had come in resolving its financial problems, repairing state enterprises and dealing with insurgency.

Although a lawyer by training, Gogoi offered a medical analogy when interviewed at his home in 2009. "Even if you are not a healthy man, even if you have a bypass surgery, you can lead a healthy life," he said. "That was my philosophy, you see. In spite of all this insurgency, in spite of all these problems, we have to regain our health so that we can lead a very, very normal life." Elected chief minister of Assam in 2001, Gogoi became head of an unhealthy state. Assam had a budget deficit of 7.8 billion rupees (about US\$165 million at the time). The state did not have the funds to pay its own employees' salaries. Public enterprises were on the brink of insolvency, threatening a collapse in key service-delivery sectors such as power and transport. Two decades of insurgency by armed ethnic groups, coupled with a heavy-handed security response by the state and federal governments, had dampened the public spirit and eroded faith in the state's ability to protect its citizens. An influx of Bengali Muslim immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh had swollen the ranks of foreigners among the populace, leading to an indigenous backlash that threatened to unravel the social fabric. An insurgent movement led by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) drew strength from worries about the erosion of traditional Assamese identity and culture.

Looking carefully within his party ranks and in the administration, Gogoi identified and recruited a team of young ministers and

experienced civil servants of the Indian Administrative Service to spearhead Assam's reform efforts. With his backing and guidance, they improved the administration and utilization of funds, promoted a fiscal-responsibility law, increased tax revenues, reformed public-sector enterprises, enhanced the ability of the police to tackle insurgents while reducing the civilian collateral damage, negotiated ceasefire agreements with ethnic insurgents, and devolved authority to autonomous ethno-geographic councils. In 2009, well into Gogoi's second term, Assam had a budgetary surplus; its public enterprises functioned more effectively, as demonstrated by the widely publicized turnaround of the Assam State Transport Corporation and improvements in power supply (though critics argued there was much room for improvement); and insurgent violence was down from previous levels. Although questions remained about the long-term viability of Gogoi's policies, observers in civil society and the media recognized Assam's turnaround.

Context

With 26.7 million people in the 2001 Indian census, Assam had a population somewhere between Peru's and Morocco's. However, its land area was far smaller than either country's. Although this level of population density was not unusual among Indian states, it was an important administrative challenge. Assam's geography and climate—hilly areas with dense forest cover and high rainfall—added to the challenge, particularly when it came to tackling insurgent groups operating in remote areas.

In 2000, the year before Gogoi became chief minister, Assam was also one of India's poorer states, with more than one-third of its population living below the state's official poverty line²—an annual per capita income of US\$92-\$97.³ That year, the Indian government's economic survey calculated

Assam's average per capita income at US\$214, which, according to the World Bank, was lower than income in countries such as Rwanda, Burkina Faso and Nepal. In terms of overall human development, Assam ranked 14th out of 15 Indian states in a 2001 study by the Planning Commission of India, topping only Bihar state.

Assam was highly fragmented along linguistic, ethnic and religious lines. Divisions existed between Assamese speakers, Bengali speakers and indigenous tribal populations like the Bodos, Karbis and Mishings. At 31% of the population, Assam's Muslim community was proportionately the second-largest of all Indian states, after the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Significant numbers of Bengali Muslims had crossed the border from Bangladesh during the previous four decades. Assam struggled to accommodate the diverse ethnic groups, many of which came into conflict with each other over economic and identity issues.

THE CHALLENGE

Finance was the first major challenge that Gogoi's government faced in 2001. The state did not have the funds required to pay its employees' salaries, pensions and benefits. Federal funds were available, but the state was required to put up one rupee for every three from the federal side. Assam was in no position to pay its share, and as a result federally sponsored programs had also dried up in the state. Developmental work had come to a halt, and the government was constantly in deficit, Gogoi said. The federal government, unwilling to bankroll the state government's financial problems, had enforced a ban on new recruitment to the state government except in the police. As a result, said Himanta Biswa Sarma, one of Gogoi's close advisers and a minister with four portfolios, the average age in

government had risen above 50, and there was a dearth of fresh talent.

Moreover, the Assam government had been contravening federal guidelines on so-called plan spending, i.e., spending that was intended for new programs. Salaries were to come out of nonplan spending, which was intended for programs already underway, but due to Assam's financial crunch the state government had been using the plan budget to pay salaries. As a result, there were virtually no new development programs in the state. Public enterprises were moribund, with hundreds of unpaid employees, and unable to deliver basic services. Government vehicles lacked fuel, hospitals ran without medicines, and public schools and colleges were forced to generate their own revenues to pay for basic goods like stationery.

What concerned Gogoi most was that in the absence of significant development and in the presence of widespread discontent among government employees and the public, insurgent forces found fertile ground for recruitment. In Sarma's words, "lack of development activity, lack of employment opportunity, had become a potential market for the militants to recruit new people." Insurgent groups and militant organizations that operated along the fault lines of Assamese society took advantage. Prominent among them was ULFA, which had emerged and gained prominence during what was called the Assam Agitation, launched by ethnic Assamese and Assamese speakers in 1979 against the influx of Bangladeshis. The movement quickly took on militant overtones and transformed into a push for a sovereign Assamese state. Although the government of India was able to reach an accord with the movement's political leaders in 1985, ULFA, the movement's military wing, remained a potential

spoiler of government reform efforts even though its focus had shifted to organized crime, arms trafficking, kidnapping and other activities.

ULFA's initial success in articulating an ethnic demand inspired parts of other communities to militarize and declare war on the state, including the Bodos, Nagas, Karbis and other groups. According to the Internet-based South Asia Terrorism Portal, between 1992 and 2002 terrorist activities claimed nearly 4,900 lives in Assam. Civilians suffered the highest casualties. In responding to the insurgency, police often used heavy-handed tactics that led to civilian injuries and deaths. There were many reports of innocent people being falsely implicated and falsely "encountered" (a euphemism for an exchange of gunfire between a criminal or terrorist and the police). As a result, the public lost confidence in the state's ability to protect its citizens, and many supported extremist groups morally and financially.

Pradyut Bordoloi, a minister of state who was partly in charge of home affairs for the first 18 months of Gogoi's first term, said, "There was a kind of polarization between police and the common people because police as an institution was always perceived as a tool of exploitation and ... the agency for harassment." Law and order reached a nadir in the 1990s, and "people would not dare to go out after 9 o'clock in the streets," recalled Jayanta Madhab, a former adviser to Gogoi. Private capital mostly flowed out of Assam, and its youth sought educational and employment opportunities in other parts of India.⁴

FRAMING A RESPONSE

Assam was a divided society trying to break free of its violent past by focusing on development as well as autonomy for ethnic groups. For many years prior to 2001, the

government of India and leaders in Assam believed that development could not begin without first achieving peace. India's northeastern region, of which Assam was the largest state, was perceived as a "problem zone" or some kind of "museum" of ethnic conflict, Sarma said when interviewed.

Gogoi decided to reverse conventional wisdom on the relationship between conflict and development. Years of trying to create a peaceful atmosphere for development in Assam had not worked. "All the time people are talking about normalcy. Normalcy first, development second," said Gogoi. "I said, we cannot wait until the normalcy returns back. First, development should go ahead in spite of all the problems with the insurgency [and] other problems that are there. We cannot wait for the normalcy to return."

"Initially, three years, it was a very difficult period," recalled Gogoi. The party in power at the federal level, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was his own Indian National Congress party's national rival. The BJP's dominance at the federal level made it difficult for Gogoi to obtain the kind of federal assistance Assam needed. He resolved to move ahead slowly and deliberately. "You see, if you want to go for a hop-step-jump, you will reach an accident," Gogoi said. "I'm not in favor of going in a very big jump, I'll tell you. ... If you can run three kilometers, you try to run it; don't try to run 10 kilometers." His tenure as minister of food in the federal government in the early 1990s had taught him a valuable lesson about reform. At a time when India had launched controversial economic liberalization efforts, Gogoi had been responsible for allowing multinational food corporations such as Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, McDonald's and Kellogg to enter the Indian market. Encountering widespread resistance, he had learned to take steps one at a time, going

out on a limb when necessary but never compromising his basic aims. He applied the same philosophy in Assam a decade later.

Although Gogoi was among the senior politicians in the Congress party, he began by looking within the party in Assam for younger and more skilled individuals to take on the responsibilities of government. He appointed a team of young party leaders as junior-level ministers (also called ministers of state) in his government. Initially he kept important ministerial portfolios like finance and home affairs for himself. At the same time, he appointed young ministers of state in these departments who could eventually take on independent responsibilities as full-fledged ministers. Some of them had grassroots experience as Congress party organizers and workers in Assam; others had technocratic or private-sector experience outside of government. Pradyut Bordoloi was one such minister with a background in the private sector; he joined the government in 2001 directly under Gogoi and took charge of multiple portfolios, including home affairs, finance, industry, science and technology, information technology and public relations. Gogoi later made him minister of forests, an important side of the economy in Assam, and in 2004 he became minister of power. His cabinet colleague, Sarma, was a grassroots party organizer who joined the government in 2002 as minister of state for agriculture, planning and development. In 2004 he was made minister of state for finance.

Gogoi also relied on retired civil servants, his colleagues in the national-level Congress party, and representatives of multilateral agencies for expertise and advice on the kinds of reforms Assam could undertake. He placed civil servants with reputations for efficiency and probity in key positions in the finance and home departments. Gogoi's own seniority in political circles, his long years of experience in federal-level politics (he had been elected to the Indian

Parliament six times since 1971), and his reputation as an honest politician were assets in helping him build a team for his reform efforts. "Nobody can say he is personally corrupt," said Jayanta Madhab, a career Asian Development Bank economist who retired to serve Gogoi as an adviser on economic and financial reforms from 2002 until 2009. Gogoi's predecessor had been plagued by corruption accusations and was identified by a government commission in 2007 as being involved in the decisions behind the killings of militants and their family members in the 1990s.⁵ Some cited this as one of the contributing factors behind Gogoi's electoral victory in 2001.⁶ Once he took office, Gogoi's reputation as a relatively uncontroversial yet effective politician helped him attract the talent he needed to create change.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

The federal government was ruled by a coalition led by the BJP, the main political competitor of Gogoi's Congress party. Because the government of India was a major source of finance for states by way of conditional and discretionary grants, a BJP-led federal government made it difficult for Gogoi to obtain the financial resources he needed. Although Assam would continue to receive its formula-based allocation of conditional grants, the BJP's dominance at the national level meant that discretionary grants likely would be difficult to obtain. Assam could not even put up the 25% state contribution that was the minimum condition for receiving federal grants. Nonetheless, Gogoi used his personal contacts with leaders in the federal government to lobby for a two-year loan. He insisted that the federal government should not punish a poor state just because it could not afford to pay its share of development funds. In these dealings, Gogoi found that his training as a lawyer was valuable. "The way you put your case is very important, just like an advocate puts his case before judges."

The federal government eventually agreed to the two-year loan. In the meantime, Gogoi reached out to the World Bank for help. The bank would provide 90% of the funding, while Assam would have to provide only 10%. Gogoi also approached the ADB for financial and technical assistance to improve Assam's power sector and design economic reforms in general. The ADB was instrumental through Jayanta Madhab, Gogoi's adviser, in assisting Assam's financial reform efforts. Gogoi's ability to pull together funds from these sources was unprecedented. Madhab suggested that, having been a federal minister, Gogoi had a "good grasp of the system." H.N. Das, a retired civil servant and former chief secretary (the senior civil servant in a state) of Assam who helped draft an official report on financial reforms for Gogoi's government in its early days, concurred: "He has a way of getting things done." Gogoi himself added, "I had a little advantage because...a lot of people started from the states; I started my career from the center."

Sarma, minister of state for finance in Gogoi's first cabinet, recalled that the government's primary aim initially was to pay the monthly salaries of its employees. The government tried to curb nonessential spending in order to conserve public funds. The federal government's ban on recruitment was renegotiated so that it would apply only to nonessential government posts, thus allowing recruiting of new and younger talent. The Assam government also assured the government of India that federal funds would be spent only on programs permitted by the federal government. This restriction prevented the state government from using plan funds to pay salaries, as it had been doing for almost 15 years.

A new political climate

In 2004, three years into his first term as chief minister, Gogoi's fortunes improved when his party won the national elections and formed

a coalition government at the federal level. Almost all the senior ministers in the federal government were his friends, and many were his juniors in the party. Moreover, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was an elected representative from Assam and was familiar with the state's difficulties. Singh's political affinity for Assam and his relationship with Gogoi loosened up the flow of funds to the state.

The path to reform was still not easy, even after the change in federal government. The Assam government began by using legal penalties to improve financial discipline in the state. One of the conditions of ADB lending required the Assam government to reduce its fiscal deficit to a manageable level. In order to achieve this goal, Sarma and his officials in the Finance Department piloted a Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act in the Assam Assembly in 2005; it was akin to similar efforts undertaken by the federal government and other state governments in India. The act mandated that the state's fiscal deficit be reduced to 3% of the state's gross domestic product by 2010. However, Sarma and his colleagues added two important clauses to Assam's act that did not exist in other states. The provisions specified three-year prison terms for any public official who implemented a project without the cabinet's permission or at a cost that exceeded the permitted amount, and for any official making what Sarma called "bogus appointments," or nonessential patronage appointments.

Introducing the value-added tax

Sarma also led tax reforms as minister of state for finance in 2005. The ministry computerized the tax department, introduced a composite tax-collection system, and passed an "entry tax" law that imposed a tax of 3% to 4% on any goods coming into Assam. The biggest increase in tax collections came from the introduction of a federally mandated value-

added tax (VAT), an indirect consumption tax levied at each stage of a good's production. In the Indian context, the VAT required stringent record keeping and computerization of records, adding to business costs and giving the government a tighter rein on tax evasion. For these reasons the idea of the VAT had been widely opposed by merchants and retailers when the government of India proposed it.

Although the federal government had passed a national law on VAT in 2005, it was each state's prerogative to legislate its own tax rate. This was a challenging task, since the prospect of the VAT had caused countrywide protests among traders and businessmen. Sarma, who had followed the protests, said he realized that implementing the act in Assam would require a "customized" approach. In order to weaken resistance to Assam's VAT legislation and ease its passage, he did three things. First, he asked the federal government for temporary exemptions on certain goods like tea, of which Assam was a major producer. Second, he requested a delay of 30 days in the legislation's implementation in Assam. Third, he temporarily exempted from the tax any firms with annual turnover of less than 300,000 rupees (about US\$6,800 in 2005).

Sarma's strategies helped Assam become the only state to pass the VAT without significant protests from the business community. The tea industry, which was a major player in the private sector, did not protest. The 30-day delay prevented protests in Assam from linking up with or being inspired by protests elsewhere in India. Within a month of the VAT legislation being enacted in the rest of India, most protests had lost momentum, making it an ideal time to implement the legislation in Assam. Lastly, the exemption for small businesses allowed the Assam government to divide and conquer the business community's opposition to the legislation. Sarma said, "In a protest movement, it is always the numbers that

matter. So, we reduced the number of traders who had grievances in the very first day. ... The big traders did not get support from the small traders." After the act was passed, the exemptions for tea and small traders were gradually lifted.

Improving public enterprises

Gogoi's young ministers brought a tactical approach to his reform agenda. In discussing strategies for implementing reform, Bordoloi, who in 2009 held three ministerial portfolios—power, public enterprises, and industries and commerce—stressed the importance of creating a "success story." When implementing a reform program, "it is ill-advised to start it all over the state all the time. Then you know you are bound to face resistance and you know you are bound to get roadblocks," he said. "You choose a small area, make a success story out of it, and then people will emulate, you know people will take up" the program.

Bordoloi adopted this approach after joining the power ministry in 2006. He soon found that transmission and distribution losses amounted to almost 50% of the state-owned Assam State Electricity Board's total power supply. The losses made it difficult for the board to cover its costs and supply electricity reliably. To address this problem, Bordoloi and the chairman of the board, Subhash Das, decided to install digital meters in each household in Guwahati, Assam's capital, to accurately record power consumption and facilitate billing. However, as the installations began, the public and civil society organizations mounted a "huge campaign" against the meters, he said. They feared that the new technology would increase their electric bills, which was in fact inevitable if the government was to reduce its transmission and distribution losses. The lack of sufficient information on the new technology exacerbated public anxiety. "Rumors went out that all their bills will go up by 30%-

40%,” recalled Das. Some protests against the meters turned violent. “When we went to fix these digital meters, in many places some boys came and attacked the work vehicles carrying digital meters and burned them [the meters] in public,” said Das.

Bordoloi and Das responded by sending electricity-board officials on a door-to-door campaign to assuage consumers’ fears in a few selected neighborhoods. The officials explained that although bill amounts would increase, the rumors of large increases were unfounded. They suggested ways in which consumers could use electricity more efficiently, by using energy-saving bulbs, for example. They also recommended that consumers could have their homes checked for loose wiring that might cause power leakage. In addition to individual households, the board officials met with local citizens’ committees that represented entire neighborhoods. The officials conveyed a similar message in these settings. In response to lawsuits filed by consumer groups, the board declared that any individual or group could have the digital meters inspected by a third party by submitting an application to the board. Ultimately, the lobbying and interaction with consumer groups paid off, and opposition waned. Das said the average rise in consumer bills turned out to be approximately 10% to 15%, and there were only a handful of applications for third-party inspections. After the board was successful in a few neighborhoods, it expanded its approach and gradually covered the rest of the city. This effort was an important step in a state where households accounted for the highest share of total electricity consumption,⁷ and urban users consumed four times more electricity per capita than rural users.⁸

Building popular support

At the Finance Department, Sarma also understood the importance of selling reform and developing a public constituency for it. Sarma

assumed that people naturally feared reform and the unfamiliar conditions that often accompanied changes. He reasoned, therefore, that “any reform needs to be backed by good political management.” This tactic involved selling reform not as reform but as a measure intended for the welfare of the people. Added Sarma, “We did not use the word reform, and we just started doing things one by one, with lots of carrots.”

Gogoi employed a number of such populist measures to build support for the government and its reform agenda. These measures spanned a range of government programs aimed at various sections of the population. Students were given computers, women received sewing machines, men received radios, girls received bicycles. Gogoi’s former adviser, Madhab, said the “hundreds of schemes” launched by the government were vital in helping Gogoi maintain the level of support required for his government to stay in power. Madhab said, “If he can serve all kinds of different people at least some point in time they will remember that ‘I got a sewing machine, I got a cycle, I got a radio,’ various other things. Obviously it is a popular thing and he will get a vote.” Gogoi had a different perspective, saying the programs were designed to promote development and sway public opinion away from insurgents. This objective also motivated Gogoi and his team’s efforts to build infrastructure in Assam’s remote corners. Connectivity was a mantra for Gogoi and his ministers. The government stepped up road- and bridge-building efforts.

Once its fiscal situation had improved, Assam was able to use its own development finances to pay for much of its populist agenda. Funds for larger infrastructure projects came from national programs delivered at the state level, which grew as the Indian economy gathered momentum in the new millennium and the federal government’s income increased. H.N. Das, the former adviser to the

government, said that Gogoi became chief minister at a time when there was a large amount of federal funding available through the government of India and the national planning commission, which was in charge of national economic development. This federal largesse allowed Gogoi to take advantage of multi-billion dollar national programs such as Bharat Nirman (building India), a comprehensive rural infrastructure program, and the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission. Because state governments were largely the implementers of federal programs, Gogoi's government gained publicity for its development agenda in this manner.

Government at the doorstep

Gogoi also experimented with a direct approach to addressing citizen concerns and involving them in governance, launching a program called *Raijor Produlit Raijor Sarkar* (Government at the Doorstep of the People). He instructed government officials at the district level to hold workshops and awareness campaigns where citizens could submit petitions detailing their grievances with the government and learn more about the government's developmental programs. This effort brought citizens in direct contact with government officials and encouraged them to put on record their grievances with the intention of compelling officials to act.

By 2009, however, although the government still held up the program as an example of bringing government closer to the people and addressing their concerns, some observers doubted whether it had a significant impact. H.N. Das said that the program produced hundreds of thousands of petitions from the public, which overwhelmed the government officials in charge of addressing them. To tackle such a large number of grievances was "physically an impossibility," according to Das. Nonetheless, in the early days

of Gogoi's administration, the program helped propagate the image of a government that was focused on participatory development. In this capacity, the program was an important weapon for Gogoi in the battle with insurgent groups for the hearts and minds of the people.

Addressing secessionist insurgency

As the government's finances stabilized and Gogoi was able to win some public support, he turned his attention to the insurgent groups that continued to threaten the peace. The most potent threat to Assam and the government of India came from the ULFA. The secessionist militant group, formed in 1979, was responsible for close to 1,000 civilian and security personnel deaths between 1992 and 2001,⁹ the year Gogoi came to power. The group, whose avowed mission was to make Assam independent from India, was especially powerful in Assam's northeastern districts, known as upper Assam. The ULFA used guerrilla and terrorist tactics and intimidation, often gaining the support of local populations who were alienated by the heavy-handed approach of the state in insurgency-affected areas. Police had a reputation in upper Assam for human-rights abuses, killings of insurgents' relatives and other forms of brutality.

The government took a two-pronged approach to the insurgency: to defeat the insurgents militarily and to win the support of people in the affected areas. This required a "military offensive, as well as a peace offensive," said Bhaskar Mahanta, the deputy inspector general of police from 2003 to 2006 in upper Assam's eastern range; his four districts were home to the 28th Battalion of the ULFA, which was considered the most violent of the ULFA forces and was the source of many of the group's top leaders. Gogoi had clearly signaled to the senior ranks of the police that the killing of militants and their family members had to stop. Rajiv Bora, commissioner and secretary of

Home and Political Affairs when interviewed in 2009, said the government's policy was to investigate through official inquiries any reports of police brutality, and to discipline police officers where appropriate. The government also established a state human-rights commission to oversee the work of the police. As Assam's financial situation improved, the government also provided better communications equipment and weapons to the police to help them battle insurgents.

Building a constituency for peace

In the eastern range, Mahanta took his cue from Gogoi's dual approach of expanding police capabilities while reining in human-rights abuses. Mahanta said he focused on two objectives: "Empower the police" and "take civil society along." He devised a single strategy to empower the police and win public trust. He reactivated village defense committees that the government had formed previously but were dormant. These bodies resembled neighborhood watch programs in which village elders would monitor activities in their community. The police would interact with the committees on a regular basis to obtain information on suspicious persons or activities. The regular interactions built familiarity and trust between villagers and police personnel.

Because there was no guarantee that villagers would cooperate with a police force that they did not consider friendly, Mahanta also took a number of steps to build relationships for the police in the districts of the eastern range. However, instead of appealing directly to the people, a strategy that had failed the government in the past, Mahanta decided to focus on children, especially children who had lost a parent in insurgent-related violence. He relied on a social program he had pioneered in the Assam police a few years earlier called *Aashwas* (Assurance). With support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the

government of India's Ministry of Home Affairs, *Aashwas* was intended to rehabilitate children who were victims of the conflict between insurgents and the police. Through the program, Mahanta arranged monthly stipends for such children, as well as scholarships, workshops, contests, and trips to other parts of India. He enlisted local non-governmental organizations to follow up with each family and ensure that stipends were spent on the children's welfare. His objectives through the program were twofold: first, to break the intergenerational cycle of violence by providing a brighter future for child victims, and second, to create a positive image of the police among the local population in upper Assam.

Mahanta also tried to reorient the attitudes of his own men toward the communities affected by insurgency, especially the children. He had 26 of his men attend a training session on child psychology with a well-known Assamese psychologist and then dispatched them for three months to Majuli, an insurgency-prone island of 140,000 people. Their job was to go from school to school and conduct workshops for children to talk about their experiences of insurgency. Mahanta also used UNICEF funds to train his men in community policing and other socially oriented functions. His aim was to instill in them "an attitude of servitude ... to be actually serving the society rather than lording over it," he said.

The ULFA ceasefire

Police efforts to earn the people's trust in upper Assam began to bear fruit, even among insurgents. The ULFA was already in slow decline due to a coordinated federal military offensive since 1990, according to Wasbir Hussain, a Guwahati-based journalist and director of a think tank called the Centre for Development and Peace Studies. On the run from the Indian military, the insurgents had set up camps in neighboring Bhutan. In 2003, the

Bhutanese army launched an offensive on these camps and further weakened ULFA. Most of its cadres were scattered across northeastern India and in parts of neighboring Myanmar, and its leaders had escaped to Bangladesh. The final straw for the insurgents in upper Assam was to see public sympathy shifting in favor of the government. In 2006, two of the three companies of the ULFA's 28th Battalion contacted Mahanta and asked him whether the chief minister would be amenable to a ceasefire. "People put so much pressure on them," said Mahanta. "One fine evening they contacted me. They said, 'Enough is enough, sir. A lot of mayhem, a lot of violence; can you give us some dignity? We want to come over ground and give away all the arms and stuff like that.'"

Mahanta moved cautiously; he first contacted Gogoi and then the government of India. Both were initially wary of the offer of a ceasefire. Although the 28th Battalion did not represent all of ULFA, it was the most violent wing. A ceasefire would weaken the ULFA's grip on northeastern Assam. Ultimately Gogoi and the Indian government began two years of secret negotiations with the insurgent group. In 2008, the two companies of the 28th Battalion surrendered their arms. The government provided each former insurgent with a financial rehabilitation package of 200,000 rupees (US\$4,500) to set up small enterprises in agriculture and animal husbandry, and to rejoin the work force. The following year, civilian deaths due to insurgency in Assam dropped by 22%.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The ULFA had inspired a number of ethnic groups that desired either an independent homeland or greater autonomy within the Indian union, most commonly in the form of a new state in the federation. These groups took up arms at the height of the ULFA insurgency in the late 1980s, when the government seemed

to be on the defensive. In 2000, the year before Gogoi came to power, Assam suffered 758 insurgent-related deaths, the second-highest number of any year between 1992 and 2009 (1998 saw 783 deaths).¹⁰

Gogoi's approach toward insurgent groups was to weaken them through greater military action, reach ceasefire accords with factions ready to talk peace, and isolate the hardliners among the rebel groups or factions. After Gogoi came to power, his government set about arranging talks with a number of ethnic rebel armies, with the aim of negotiating ceasefires.

The government would signal its willingness to enter into ceasefire accords, offer amnesty and rehabilitation packages to insurgents, and then keep them waiting in camps while the details were worked out. The wait could last for years, with the government dragging its feet and often changing its policy on whether dealing with factions of insurgent groups was better than trying to approach groups as a whole. As a result, a number of groups lost their potency while waiting for a political response to their demands.

According to journalist Hussain, if this was a strategy on the part of the government to induce "fatigue" among rebels, it might not have helped to bring lasting peace to the state because it failed to sincerely address the causes of the conflict.

Autonomous councils

Some ethnic groups, however, were too big for the government's ceasefire strategy to be successful. Prominent among them were the Bodos, for whom the government adopted an entirely different approach: regional autonomy. The Bodos were Assam's largest plains tribe, concentrated in the western and northern parts of the state. They were originally represented by the All Bodo Students Union, a mainstream political organization that demanded greater autonomy for Bodos within India.

In 1986, a section of the community took up arms and formed the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, which had secessionist aims. Later, a separate armed group, the Bodoland Liberation Tigers, emerged; it had a more limited objective of a separate state for Bodos within the Indian federation.

As part of its strategy of dividing insurgent groups, the Gogoi administration found it easier to deal with the non-secessionist group, which also enjoyed the support of the mainstream students union.

Given the size and threat of the overall Bodo movement, the government reached an accord with the non-secessionist group in 2003. The agreement established the Bodoland Territorial Council, a region with special constitutional protection—negotiated by Gogoi with the federal government—with elected representatives, an annual budget of one billion rupees (US\$21.4 million in 2003) and legislative and executive autonomy over 42 sectors including agriculture, industry and rural development.

The accord was controversial, given that Bodos made up less than 35% of the territory earmarked for the autonomous region. Non-Bodos in the region protested against the government maneuver.

However, according to Bora, commissioner and secretary for Home and Political Affairs in Gogoi's government, "eventually the government realized that between greater and sustained violence [by Bodos] and low-level public agitation [by non-Bodos], addressing the greater violence was a bigger priority." Thus the government encouraged a long negotiation process in the region whereby Bodo leaders offered guarantees to non-Bodos that the latter's interests would be secure in the new autonomous region. This policy secured the status of the autonomous region.

Granting ethnic groups autonomy was a politically expedient solution to Assam's

insurgency problems. It also helped Gogoi win the support of newly mobilized groups in the political arena, in exchange for granting them autonomy.

This element of quid pro quo did not go unnoticed by observers when, in Assam's elections three years later, Gogoi had to rely on the support of the 11 seats won by a faction of the Bodo People's Progressive Front, a political party that had emerged from the Bodo accord. Lacking the majority required to form a government, Gogoi's Congress party formed a coalition with the Bodo party, and Gogoi was able to claim a second consecutive term as chief minister.

ASSESSING RESULTS

By mid-2009, the Assam government had made impressive gains in finance, and indicators pointed to a significant improvement in the state's economy. Its annual plan budget had more than tripled to 55 billion rupees (US\$1.1 billion) in 2009 from 15.2 billion rupees in 2001. Whereas Assam had been contravening federal regulations and spending 50% of funds intended for new programs on salaries, in 2009 it used only 1% of these funds for salaries. The remaining salary payments came out of funds intended for programs already underway, as had been intended all along but not achieved before Gogoi's administration. Tax collection more than doubled to 40.2 billion rupees in 2009 from 14.1 billion rupees in 2001. The annual growth rate of Assam's gross domestic product increased during this period to roughly 7% from 2.7%, and annual per capita income increased to 21,464 rupees from 10,198 rupees.

Despite gains in financial administration and economic growth, in 2009 those in Assam's government were keenly aware of the coming challenge, which Jayanta Madhab described this way: "We have a hell of a lot of money now we've got to spend." Sarma was also aware of the hurdles that Assam faced in effectively

deploying its wealth: “Our implementation track record is not that phenomenal, and we are still having problems. [The] delivering mechanism is still poor.”

Insurgency

Gogoi’s government concluded a number of ceasefire agreements with various groups, and the state saw an overall decline in the number of insurgent-related deaths compared with the years before 2001. In 2006, an election year, the number of deaths was the lowest in 13 years.¹¹ In 2009, two out of three companies of the ULFA’s 28th Battalion remained at peace with the government, as did a number of other insurgent organizations associated with ethnic groups. Gogoi’s proudest achievement was that support for militants among communities in Assam had declined. Although there was no quantitative evidence backing this claim, former government adviser H.N. Das said that Gogoi’s policy of promoting development and bringing insurgents to the negotiating table had negated the support these groups once enjoyed among Assam’s citizens. “People attitudinally have become opposed to the insurgents,” said Das.

Organizations such as the ULFA also had themselves to blame for losing public support, said journalist Hussain, who pointed out that the ULFA had started off as an insurgent organization but over time had “degenerated into a pure terrorist group.” By straying from its social and political objectives, the ULFA had lost public support.

Despite the decline in insurgent attacks, data collected in 2010 showed that in 2009 Assam still suffered from routine acts of violence and terrorism, experiencing 175 civilian casualties that year.¹² Critics such as Hussain pointed to what they called a basic flaw in Gogoi’s approach based on ceasefires. By concluding such agreements and keeping insurgents waiting in camps for rehabilitation, the government was simply “postponing peace,”

Hussain said. Ceasefires signified the end of hostilities but did not pave the way for long-term settlements with insurgent groups or any serious consideration of their demands. “Scales of violence have gone down, but we are nowhere near resolving the issue,” Hussain said.

Bora of the Home and Political Affairs department had a similar thought: “Today we have a situation where we are ... in ceasefire with a number of groups. But coming to a meaningful settlement with these groups seems to be a very difficult affair,” he said.

Where the government attempted some form of settlement, as in the case of the Bodos, the long-term effects of the solution were not taken into account. After the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council, other ethnic groups began demanding autonomy. The government yielded by providing them autonomy, but not under the constitutional protection that the Bodos had. Of the resulting six autonomous councils for ethnic minorities, five did not cover any contiguous region but were composed of specific villages where the ethnic groups were a majority. In at least one council, this policy created problems of territorial jurisdiction with the state government.¹³ The impact of these councils on the state government’s authority and ability to effectively implement policies in these regions was not clear. Despite these concerns, in January 2009 the government announced the creation of seven more autonomous councils for ethnic groups, raising Assam’s total to 13.

REFLECTIONS

In 2009, looking back on his efforts as Assam’s chief minister, Tarun Gogoi emphasized the importance of knowing how to get things done. “Sometimes I have seen people, they work all night but they don’t know how to get things done. ... I don’t need to work all night. I know how to get to whom no one gets; then you sit tight and get your thing done.”

Gogoi was successfully able to lobby the federal government for funds and assistance so that Assam could improve its financial condition. With the help of a young team of ministers, he was able to introduce measures to increase the state government's revenues and improve the functioning of its public enterprises. He was able to diminish the impact of insurgent groups and negotiate ceasefires with them to at least temporarily bring down the rate of violence in Assam.

While Gogoi's successes relied on sound tactics, he stressed the importance of vision in determining the best methods. "Vision is number one," he said, "Unless you have a vision,

you see, you will not be a successful politician or administrator."

What was his vision for Assam? "I want Assam to be in the category of developed states in this country," he said. In a 2008 survey of 17 Indian states published in the newsweekly *India Today*, Assam earned top rank in terms of the pace of reform since 1991 on a composite score of performance in agriculture, consumer markets, macroeconomic stability, education, governance, investment, health and infrastructure. Although challenges remained in 2009, Gogoi clearly had moved Assam along a path to development and peace.

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¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Samudra Gupta Kashyap, "Gorkhas to get autonomous council in Assam," *Indian Express*, 27 Jan 2009.

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