

Development in Conflict Situation: A case of Assam

“Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor” – James Baldwin

The attempt of this paper is to look at some of the dynamics of existing poverty in North Eastern region of India – a region today known for its ethnicity as well as continuing conflict.

Introducing North East India...

A land with plethora of races, religions, cultures and dialects; a land mass of 2,55,083 square Kms or 7.8 % of the total area of the country¹; a land accounting for 3.75 % of the total population of the country;² a land comprising of seven states popularly called the ‘seven sisters’ perhaps because of the climatic, geographical, political, social, ecological and psychological contiguity; a land housing around 200 indigenous communities suggesting the ethnic and cultural diversity within this regional unity; a land which makes itself strategically important for the fact that 90% of its borders form India’s international boundaries; a land where tea is an industry, handicrafts a major occupation

¹ NER databank, North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd,

² Census India, 2001

and martial art a favoured sport; ³a land of vast natural resources and biodiversity with dense forests, perennial rivers, swift flowing streams, minerals, oils, breathtaking flora and fauna in abundance; yet, despite all this, North East of India is a land strife with conflict and insurgency for the past so many decades which is continuously tattering the basic social fabric!

Yes, life amidst acute social and economic hardships in a conflict ridden zone is what the North Eastern Region, connected to Indian subcontinent through a narrow passage and referred to as chicken's neck⁴ corridor, stands today.

The 38.5 million population of North-East India is in sync with the country in terms of Rural – Urban population where rural areas house 88 percent of its total population and only 12 percent is what belongs to urban areas of the region⁵. The region consists of both hills and valleys; however, it is in the plains and valleys where majority of the population lives perhaps because of more conducive and congenial living conditions.

What gives NE its predominantly tribal character is that most of the states are mostly inhabited by tribes having unique social and cultural practices. Overall tribals account for over 30 percent of the total population of the region. Further, in states like Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, scheduled tribes comprise more than 60 % of the population⁶.

³ NER databank, North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd,

⁴ North East region is connected with the rest of India only through a narrow corridor in North Bengal having an approximate width of 33 Kms on the eastern side and 21 Km on the western side.; this narrow corridor known as chicken's neck – NER data bank

⁵ Census India, 2001

⁶ NER databank, North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd,

The major religions are Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism while English, Hindi, Assamese, Khasi, Garo, Jaintia, Manipuri, Mizo, Nagamese, Bengali, Nepali and other local dialects form the language circuit of the region.

Perceived problems of the Region...

Talking about the region of North East, the problems it has to grope with are well evident. Insurgency or underground movement has almost become a synonym for the region. Of course, tracking it to the level of social and economic indicators for the sake of finding reasons for such heightened underground movement reflects the dismal performance of both these sectors in many, if not all, states of the NE. High rate of enrollment is succeeded by still higher rate of drop-outs particularly in primary and secondary education. Table 1 (a), 1 (b) and 1(c) clearly reflect on the fact that high enrollment ration is coupled with high drop out rates, more evident in states like Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura

Tables 1(a), 1(b) and 1(c) here

On the health front, both infrastructure wise and by sheer number of Malarial infestations, Tuberculosis and water borne diseases due to acute shortage of potable water, the records are abysmally poor. North East India has only 4 % of country's population but contributes to as much as 10% of nation's malaria load and 25 % of all deaths recorded in the country. The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) is 25 times that of Kerala with around 500 deaths per 1 lac live births.⁷

⁷ Sunil Kaul's Article " Health in the North East", The Catalyst, Issue :1 Volume 6, p8

To top it, the continuous rise of HIV/AIDS cases in states like Manipur is extremely alarming. Not to forget is the greatest of threats to the region's youth with the menace of drugs. The drug route through the infamous Golden Triangle along the Indo-Myanmar border lies right here!

Similar to social infrastructure, lack of adequate economic infrastructure for decades has impeded speedy growth and exhilarated unemployment. Primarily, an agrarian economy, the practices of shifting/ Jhum cultivation and predominant monocropping has given least impetus to productivity or any hope to the starving economy. Barring some private sector investment in tea, one of the major industries of North East, inadequate large scale private investment in the region has limited the opportunities of employment further. The Government machinery, by far seems the major player in terms of running the North Eastern economy both in terms of production and marketing. Thus, over stretched state machinery coupled with apathy, lack of will and proper economic strategies saw high incidence of unemployment . The per cap income indicated Rs 3,530 for North Eastern Region against national average of Rs 5,440; the region also lags behind national average in terms of roads/ railways, irrigation , per capita consumption of electricity and fertilizer consumption and twelve other variables⁸

Coming to civil society at large, the region has always believed in establishing strong community norms/feelings and group formation even around social issues has always been an integral part of their tradition and culture, numerous youth clubs and Women's organisations being examples. But what lacked was **institutional continuity**. So deep

⁸ Centre for Monitoring in Indian Economy- CMIE Survey

rooted was the traditional mode of charity and relief services that it left little room for Institution building around social development.

Community driven development has been a late arrival on the canvas of North East.. This is perhaps related to the low level of sharing learning experiences of similar local situations in other parts of the country. For instance, with weaving and bamboo/cane craft being household skills of this predominantly rural society, there has been little by way of concerted action to translate these skills into opportunities for rural livelihoods or develop markets outside the region for their products and lead themselves to the path of self reliance. Of the 90 million tons of bamboo available for commercial utilisation in the country, the North East accounts for 54 percent, worth Rs 5000 crore in its raw form. Even a value addition of two times can create an industry worth Rs 10,000 crore⁹.

Whether, the issue of environmental and forest degradation or health disasters like Malarial deaths, only sporadic voices have been heard from among the people of the region. This non assertion or lack of articulation of civil society might be due to lack of support, lack of mobilization and weak civil society (read NGOs) capacities.

To add to this, rising environmental degradation combined with perpetual disasters like floods and land slides leading to soil and land erosions have become recurring nuisances. Further, Institutional degradation and deteriorating political ethos have aggravated the already ingrained sense of alienation among the common masses. This sense of alienation

⁹ C Surendranath's article in the Catalyst, ' Bamboo in the Backyard', Issue: 1 Volume 6

perhaps set its roots with the political isolation of the region through the Inner line regulations of 1873 and Excluded Area Act of 1935.

Singh (1999) writes that in North East during the last 50 years, two contradictory forces have been simultaneously in operation. One is of democracy, ecology and culture and the other of insurgency, terrorism and corruption.

A marked feature is that all North Eastern states fall under a special category where 90 percent of assistance is received from Central government as grant; the per capita devolution of central plan and non plan funds is amongst the highest in the country¹⁰, yet going by sheer statistics on poverty index presented in Table 2, one could see that both these are inversely proportional.

Table 2 here

The Human Poverty Index is a composite of variables capturing deprivation in three dimensions of human development viz, economic, educational and health. These have been captured by proportion of population living below poverty line, proportion of population without access to safe drinking water/sanitation/electricity, medical attention at birth/vaccination and proportion living in kutchha houses, proportion of illiterate population and children not enrolled in schools and proportion of population not accepted to survive beyond age 40)

¹⁰ source: center for Policy research, New Delhi

Table 2 presents the poverty index for two decades in these states in comparison with all India average. Figures reveal that for two consecutive decades the HPI has been higher for all the seven states compared to the All India Average. Further, among a total of 32 states, it is the North Eastern states like Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, which occupy the bottom most ranks in terms of HPI. The only state within the region to still have a comparable HPI with states in other parts of the country is Mizoram.

The case of Assam...

In a region that accommodates eight states and is home to vast diversities and complexities of culture, societies, topographies, politics, histories, languages/dialects and civil society traditions, it is difficult to do justice with each area (geographically and politically bound) having its own set of problems. However, the North East is known today as a region that shares a common feature of being in crisis and conflict. Broadly speaking and as mentioned earlier, the region is engulfed in severe problems in almost all sectors of economic, social, political, physical and natural infrastructure. Apart from serious shortcomings in delivery mechanisms related to the above sectors, not much has happened towards creating solutions; essentially a state show, serious multi-sector interactions on needed policy changes is seldom a priority. Moreover, the very nascent voluntary movement and the civil society embedded in the region has till now chosen to either leave it to outsiders to echo their (democratic) voices or to militant/ underground outfits within the region to raise their (violent) voices against the seemingly perpetual problems, be it recurring malarial deaths or severe environmental degradation.

Referring to the seven states commonly as North East and giving it somewhat a regional identity might be because of the commonalities that exist – in terms of remoteness or geographic isolation, similar conflict situations that include strong underground militant movements as well as ethnic clashes, common historical thread and cultural bonding. This notwithstanding, clubbing the diverse political boundaries as one unit for most practical purposes or during interactions harbours some doubts and might also run the risk of an imbalanced view by missing on the wide ranging diversities in the context of each of the state's people, culture, society, politics and history. Apathy in taking into account this element of diversity that exists across the seven states might culminate into gross insensitivity in dealing with the most pressing issues in a specific political area.

It is for this reason that instead of focusing on the entire North Eastern Region for analysing the poverty, conflict and development dynamics, we focus on a specific spatial area, that of a particular state marked by distinct political boundaries. For sheer convenience in coping with the vastness of the subject, the state of Assam is taken here as representative of the NER. Bhattacharya (2001) states that Assam, an enchanting region is practically a synonym for the whole of North Eastern India. Equipped with article 371-B of the constitution that provides special provision for the state, the present state of Assam is much smaller than what it was forty years ago. This notwithstanding, Assam is still the largest economy in the North East perhaps because of its strategic location as gateway to the North East. However, the statement in the Shukla Commission Report, 1997, “the four deficits that confront the NER; a basic needs deficit, an infrastructural

deficit, a resource deficit, and most importantly a two way deficit of understanding with rest of the country which compounds the others”- holds obviously for Assam as well.

History, Economy & Social Structure of Ancient Assam

Assam situated between Himalayas and the north-eastern hills like other states in the north-eastern India is essentially rural in its characteristics. About 85% population in the rural areas depend on agriculture or allied activities.¹¹ Till the end of the pre-Christian era, Assam was full of thick wood and jhoom¹² cultivation was in vogue. However, the systematic settlement begun in the earlier centuries of the Christian era, with forest lands cleared in few patches by the side of river Brahmaputra for plough agriculture. More land was brought under agriculture gradually as the land was fertile and the new system of plough agriculture increased the production of cereals. People adopted agriculture as the chief source of livelihood. Barter system facilitated the growth of trade.

However, before medieval time, evidences of inter-state trade were not found. Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* mentions some objects of high commercial importance like sandal, aloe and incense to be found in various parts of Assam. Arthashastra also suggests manufacture of silk as an industry of urban economy. It seems that systematic trade activities in the form of barter begun only after the later half of the 2nd century AD. It appears that this marked the beginning of trains of traders and wealth seekers who came here and many of them started settling down. As the contact with Bengal and other states begun, the need to protect the product and the trader was felt. This was probably the commencement of

¹¹ R. Gopalakrishnan, Assessment of Politico-geographical landscape

¹² a method of slash and burn agriculture, which also signifies shifting from one location to other to allow trees to grow back. This method is still practiced in hills of North Eastern states

first administrative systems by way of agreeing on a common guardian system for tribal chiefs. In the middle of 4th century AD, the Magadhian emperor Samudragupta marched to Kamrupa (ancient Assam) and the king was forced to obey the Mauryan emperor. This was not just a political invasion but also cultural and signifies opening up of wide trade opportunity with the external world, particularly Bengal but also Tibet, Burma and China. However, Assam was never part of the mighty Mauryans and later Gupta or Mughal empires. Primary exports from Assam were silk, silk cloth, bay leaf, lac, buffalo and rhinoceros hide and horns, elephant tusks, aloe wood oil, musk, black and white chowris, gold, iron, rice, textiles. Imports comprised silver, copper, salt. Routes to the neighbouring provinces and the countries beyond the northern and eastern frontiers developed. Besides roads, there were mountain passes which, connected with Tibet and Butan and boat route for trade with Bengal.¹³

Assam never had a single dominating stock of people, but had a number of settlers distinguished by chronology. In the 19th century, British empire formally invaded and incorporated Assam in its territory but the tribal areas were kept isolated. The officials tried patronizing the traditional chiefs. There was certain amount of unrest as rulers joined hands and occasionally fought with temporary kingdoms which rose from time to time. The Bodos and Kacharis belonging to the Mongoloid stock comprised the earliest inhabitants in Assam, and are often referred as original inhabitants and sometime yellow tribes. The nomenclature has undergone change over different geographical area and time of the history. The Kacharis are called Dimasas in North cachar, Bodos in the Brahmaputra valley and Mech in Goalpara and North Bengal. Bodo-Kacharis established

¹³ Nisar Ahmed's article on Economy of Ancient Assam

koch kingdom from Cooch Vihar to the Jia Bhareli (Kameng) river, east of Tezpur; Assam has thus been a land of trade and cultural exchanges, like any other parts of ancient and medieval India. The Tais had started moving west into the Brahmaputra valley through the eastern Himalayan gateways for some centuries till 13th century, the time when Ahoms invaded the Upper Assam. Koch joined hands with Ahoms to fight out Mughals under Aurangzeb who marched and advanced through Brahmaputra valley, and were defeated in the Battle of Saraighat.

According to Mali (1993), the population of Assam consists of many heterogeneous elements. Since time immemorial Assam has been the meeting ground of diverse ethnic & cultural streams - the principle migrants have been the Austro- Asiatics, the Dravidians, the Tibeto- Burman , the Mongoloid and Aryans. The Austro- Asiatics are the earlier migrants who initially dwelt in the Brahmaputra valley and later on made their alternative homes in the Hills. The Khasi & Jantias of Meghalaya are said to be their descendents; the Dravidians came next. The Mongoloids in general belong to the Tibeto- Burman family of the Indo Chinese Group . The early waves brought in the forefather of the Kacharis , The Dimasa , The Bodos , the Rabhas , the Lalungs ; the Kochs have in them an admixture of Dravidians & mongoloid stocks and are called the Rajbonshis in Golpara . The Chutias originally settled in the NE tip in upper Assam and later on gave way to make room for the Ahoms who belong to the Shan sub section of the Indo Chinese family. The miris & Karbis both belong to Tibeto- Burman races .

There are 23 Schedule Tribes constituting 10.99 % of the total population of Assam¹⁴.

Due mainly to the mixture of the Mongolian element in the society the cast system amongst the Hindu is less rigid than in other parts of India.(Goswami, 1988)

Tea was discovered in 1821 by the British and who exploited its commercial value fully. The first tea garden was established around 1835 and the first consignment of tea from Assam was exported to London. More and more lands were cleared and brought under tea plantation. British brought labours for tea garden from far away places: mainly tribals Oraons and Mundas from Chotanagpur, Santhals from Santhal Paraganas and west Bengal, Orissa and Central Province. All these created a systematic harassment of the local tribals.

Verghese (1996) mentions that Britishers also engineered influx of migrants to meet the growing demand of tea garden labours, which was not met locally except seasonally. Over one million hectare land was brought under tea plantation. Santhals and Nepalese started to settle in Goalpara and the entire Brahmaputra region. However, the tension begun to grow much later as probably the political and Economical changes did not ensure equitable distribution of wealth generated through the systems of trade. And secondly those who were the original settlers, found the growing presence of recent migrants as a major threat to their own existence.

Gopalakrishnan (1995) contends that “today, in the Northeast, ethno-linguistic cleavages are just as important as religious socio-economic or class based cleavages for

¹⁴ NER data bank- NEDFi

development. It seems that this significance has been neglected because its role is underestimated and misunderstood. This situation is perhaps due to the perception that economic change and increasing participation would replace the traditional cleavages such as language will disappear as a result of developments in communication.”

It is evident that the strategic political policies pertaining the region actually contributed in isolating the entire north-eastern region and Assam that created a wide psychological divide among people. Two major discoveries: tea and petroleum reserve which could have transformed the economy of Assam significantly, did not prove so. British rulers for its economic and strategic interests created a system to siphoning out the two major resources from the state with major processing and marketing operations located outside of the state. Assam achieved a favourable balance of trade primarily because of tea. However, the dividends from tea were enjoyed by the British empire and the trader communities like Marwaris, who also migrated to the state as there was spurt of trading opportunity and the immigrant tea tribes from central and eastern India sent money back home. This coupled with perceived threat to their identity and culture laid the basis of continuing disquiet and unrest.

The dynamics of development...

The problems of Infrastructure, be it physical, social, economical, natural or political, discussed earlier for North East as a whole could be best substantiated and analysed with the help of facts and figures taking Assam as a representative state. The state's performance on some of these indicators have been accumulated as the Human Development Index. Table 3 presents the HDI with respect to Assam and All India average for the years 1981 and 1991.

Table 3 here

The HDI is a composite of variables capturing attainments in three dimensions of human development viz. Economic, educational and health. These have been captured by per capita monthly expenditure adjusted for inequality; a combination of literacy rate and intensity of formal education; and a combination of life expectancy at age 1 and infant mortality rate

The Gender disparity index is estimated as proportion of female attainments to that of male for a common set of indicators. The variable used to capture economic attainment is worker population ratio which, is different from the variable used to capture economic attainment in the HDI

The rank for rural Assam and combined rural and urban Assam in terms of HDI remains the same even after passing of a decade. Among a list of 32 states, Assam has the highest gender disparity in 1981 followed by only a marginal improvement in 1991. Though rank

and value wise, the figures show substantial improvement for Urban Assam in one decade, however, the area of interest and concern is rural Assam as the population is predominantly rural based in Assam. According to Mali (1993), Assam is predominantly a rural economy where 90 percent of Assam's population lives in villages and depends on Agriculture. Also, from table 4, it is evident that urbanisation has been quite slow in Assam (9.88, 11.10 and 12.72 percent for 1981, 1991 and 2001 respectively)

Table 4 here

Table 5 reflects on incidence of unemployment which shows a sharp rise in 1993-94 for both rural and urban Assam and when combined. The incidence of unemployment has been much higher than the national average for all the three years. According to an estimate, as of today there are 18 lacs unemployed youth in Assam¹⁵

¹⁵ Interview with the Chief Minister of Assam appeared in the Week, January 13, 2003

Table 5 here

Since the 90's growth in per capita income of the state has almost stagnated.¹⁶ Table 6 presents the per capita NSDP both in Rs. and percent for Assam against the national average for eight consecutive years beginning from 1990. The Cumulative growth rate for these years have been estimated as bare 1.01 % for Assam compared to 34.73 at all India level.

Table 6 here

Having studied the available data on economic, educational and health attainments (HDI), incidence of unemployment, rate of urbanisation, growth in per capita income, one could very well say that the figures are not encouraging at all. Though table 2 presented earlier indicates the poverty index for Assam as well, it is prudent to look at the actual percent of population who live below the poverty line in the state. Table 7 indicates the percent of population in Assam and the national average for the years 1983,1993-94 and 1999-2000 that has been stated to live below poverty line. These figures are for rural, Urban and both combined together. An interesting observation here is that similar to the figures for incidence of unemployment, here also the highest percentage of population below poverty line is recorded for the year 1993 –94. Focusing

¹⁶ NER databank, NEDFi

on rural poverty, Assam fared better than all India in 1983 but the trend completely got reversed from 1993 onwards with Assam having a population below poverty line much more than the national average. Further, for the poverty line which is in Rs. Per month, the **difference** in percent of population falling below it is wider between Assam and All India from 1993 onwards (a difference of 8 and 13 percent for 1993-94 and 1999-2000 respectively between Assam and All India for rural poverty). This is evident both in case of rural poverty and when rural and urban poverty combined together

Table 7 here

It is exactly this situation which, is appalling. In a scenario where with each progressing year most of the other states of the country are performing better (to have been able to bring down the national average percent of population below poverty line considerably), the case is just reverse for Assam! Not only is this persisting over a period of time or recurring constantly¹⁷, but also the intensity or severity with which it exists having such significant percent of population living in poverty (as high as 45 and 40 percent in rural Assam for 1993-94 and 1999-2000 respectively) is what causes concern.

In the year 1999- 2000 when Assam recorded the widest difference with the national averages on rural, urban and combined percent of population living below poverty line (13, 18 and 10 percent respectively) , the state also became the ground for maximum insurgent activities. Table 8 clearly points that not only did Assam record the highest no.

¹⁷ Oxford Dictionary of Difficult words, Oxford University Press, 2002 (Ed. Archie Hobson) terms the adjective "persisting for a long time or constantly recurring" as 'Chronic'

of killings in the year 1999 and 2000 when compared to other North Eastern states groping with similar insurgent activities but also the fact that killings and kidnappings taken together (600 for year 2000 over 418 for year 1999), there actually has been an increase of 43.54 percent over preceding year!

Table 8 here

If figures given in these tables on poverty, conflict, some economic indicators and development indices are anything to go by, then a natural curiosity of finding a reason for these arises. Mali (1993) writes that there has been an abnormal growth of population in Assam. Table 9 showing the percentage decadal variation in population in Assam in comparison to All India from 1901 to 1981 would help in deepening one's understanding around this.

Table 9 here

Mali (1993) further explains that the rate of growth from 1901 to 1951 was below 20 percent per decade, which abnormally rose to 35 % during 1951 to 1971 every decade followed by 36.05 % of projected growth rate during 1971-1981. Against this, the all India Average has been around 22 % since 1951 every decade. **Among all the states, the highest increase in population between 1901 to 1981 was in Assam.**(+ 504.83 against national average of +187.05). This high rate of population growth over decades is anything but mere natural growth as contended by many demographers and experts

on North East.

Much has been discussed, debated and written about this abnormal growth of population and even a hurried trip to the state would make it very evident that this abnormal growth is not a natural one. A large scale immigration from other side of the International boundary- from Bangladesh- is actually quite visible!

Hazarika (2001) writes explicitly that “ population density computed at about 800 persons per square Km, makes Bangladesh the most densely populated part of the world. The pressure on the land is acute”.

Added to this tremendous pressure on land, the recurring and severe intensity floods force a large segment of this population to cross the fence. ¹⁸Hazarika puts forth that the question of illegal migration from East Pakistan and now Bangladesh is not a new issue- it has been of concern to the region since 1950s and was perceived as a major threat even earlier. He quotes the remarks of the census commissioner for Assam in 1921 speaking of the movement of peasants from Mymensingh district of East Bengal into the Assam valley “ Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staff, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself... during the last 25 years. It looks like a marvel of administrative organization on the part of Government but it is nothing of the sort: the only thing I can compare it to is the mass movement of a huge body of ants”

¹⁸ Dr Imtiaz Ahmed of Dhaka University, Bangladesh estimates that 1.72 mn people crossed into India between 1961-71, another half a million for 1971-81 and not less than 6.0 lacs crossed over into Assam alone between 1981-91- as quoted by Hazarika (2001) who puts the figure at 1.8 mn over a 30 year period

During the heightened period of independence movement of India from 1930s onwards certain groups like the one led by Mohammad Saadulla in Assam, such influx was actually encouraged for the simple reason of outnumbering one religious group by the other. A detailed account of the political happenings around such deliberate demographic changes and intentions is given by Hazarika (1995) as to how this inflow was an organized one in those years.

Quoting him(2001) further “the concerns fuelled by the movements of those days continue to trouble Assamese minds today. Since the 1970s, these worries have split over into confrontations between ‘settlers’ and ‘locals’ as pressure on land and other resources has grown. Conflicts and clashes have become increasingly common”.

Goswami (1988) mentions that the partition of the country in 1947 led to an inflow of Hindu Bengali middle class refugees from East Pakistan who settled down mostly near urban towns or rural areas where they had relatives or linguistic affinity. ¹⁹The inflow of Muslim farm settlers from East Bengal again began post 1951 to Government waste lands, grazing lands, forest land and *chars* (read riverine islands)

Mali (1985) states that “during the British rule the government followed a policy, of encouraging immigrants to come and settle in Assam. The virgin and fertile soils of Assam attracted immigrants from East Bengal, now Bangladesh. The inflow of foreign nationals have created serious socio- political and economic problems for the indigenous

¹⁹ It is widely believed that the seven million “missing” population of Hindus in Bangladesh have largely migrated to Assam, Tripura, North Bengal in India

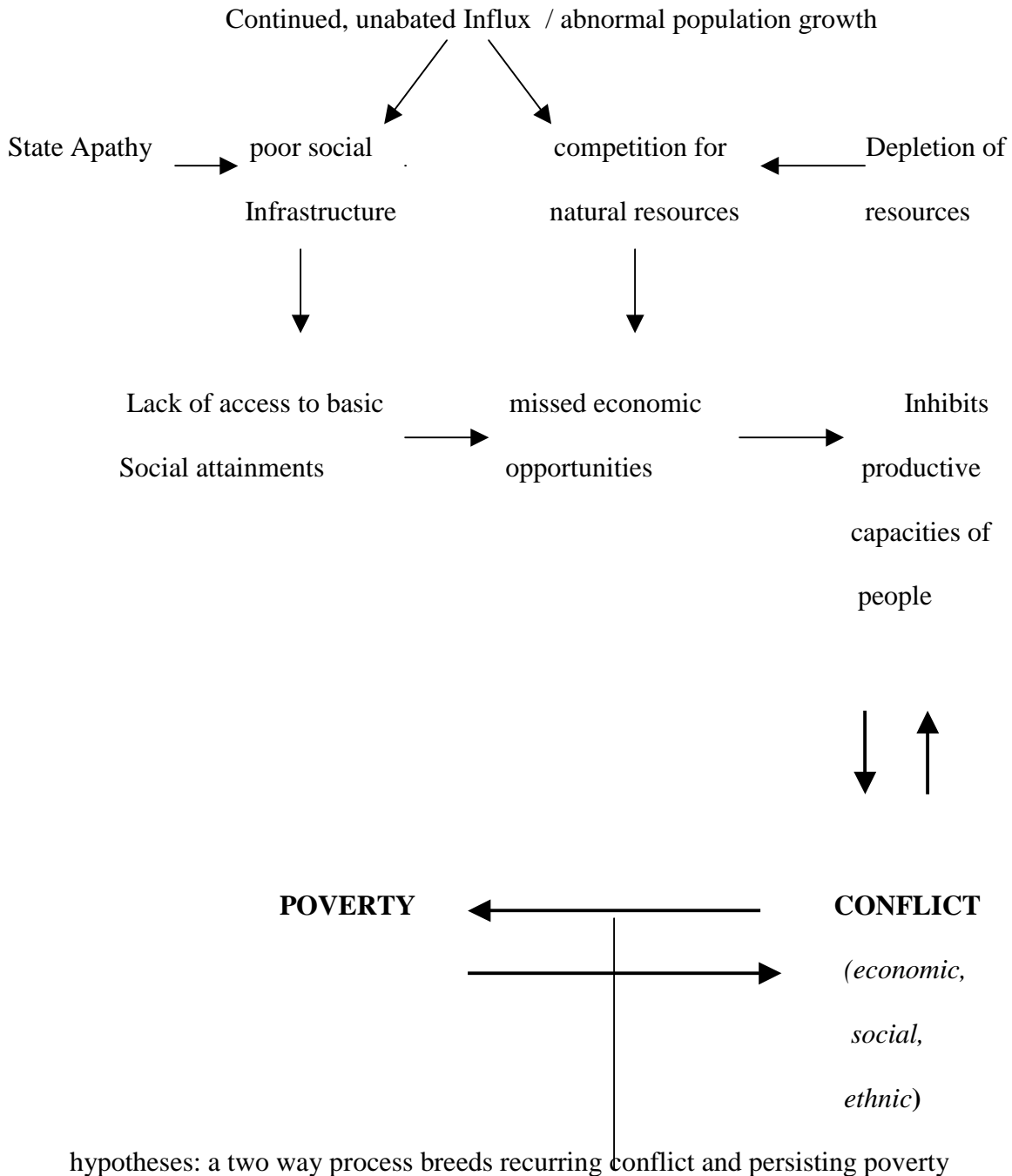
population of the state, besides making a tremendous impact on the growth of population in the state”.

The density of population figures in Assam too have been pointing at the rapid rate of increase leading to reduction in land: man ratio (please refer to table 4).

The threat of influx by different communities, be it Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh, Bengali Hindus from erstwhile East Bengal or migrant tribes from other states like Orissa, West Bengal, Bihar, has always been the most sensitive issue. Along with the pressure on already dwindling economy and deteriorating social infrastructure, the major fear in the minds of people is that this would completely change the religious demography, linguistic demography or even erosion of ethnic population or original inhabitants like the native tribes. The six year long agitation by students from entire Assam from 1979-85 against illegal migration, the continuous separatist activities by one of the native tribes - the Bodos – against migrated tribes and also “foreigners”(read the settlers from Bangladesh) bear testimony to this. Recurring and violent clashes apart²⁰, these continuing religious, ethnic and linguistic conflicts are tattering the basic social fabric by each passing day and pushing the state to a point of total economic devastation with signs of normalcy remaining a distant dream.

²⁰ One instance is the inhuman massacres of 1983 in a small village called Nellie in Central Assam where around 2000 Bengali speaking Muslim settlers were killed. The same year saw a spurt in violence and attacks

The following illustration might help in further clarity in understanding this vicious cycle of migration, abnormal population growth, poverty and conflict.



This paper concludes with the statement that poverty in Assam has its root in the abnormal growth of population which, is again not a natural growth but due to continuous influx of migrants that is putting tremendous pressure on land: man ratio. But the hypotheses that this competition for natural resources, economic opportunities and even cultural identity is the reason behind recurring economic, social and ethnic conflicts is what makes for an extremely relevant and further study- of a probable relation between persisting poverty and recurring conflict. This paper suffers from terrible time and resource constraints. Given an opportunity, it would be anyone's interest to scientifically analyse the relationship, if any, between poverty and conflict in Assam or North East, for that matter.

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