

Asom Barta

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 4 | AUGUST 2022

A MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

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Assam, NE back Murmu to the hilt

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Assam and other Northeastern States backed President Droupadi Murmu to the hilt in her presidential election campaign. Assam legislators gave the new President 104 votes signalling the support she had enjoyed in the State cutting across party lines.

Earlier, she had campaigned vigorously in all the seven sister States of North East, besides holding a meeting with Sikkim legislators near a resort in Siliguri in West Bengal on July 11.

She arrived in Guwahati on the evening of July 5 accompanied by Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal after visiting Manipur and Tripura. She was received at the airport by Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma and some of his Cabinet colleagues.

Her two-day visit to the State was eventful. On July 6, she visited Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Meghalaya to return to Guwahati. Later, on July 7, she went to Mizoram and returned to the city later in the afternoon wherein she visited the Kamakhya Temple before meeting Assam MPs and MLAs of the Bharatiya Janata Party as well as those of its alliance partners AGP and the UPPL in a city hotel. Also present were three MLAs of the



Droupadi Murmu being sworn in as President by Chief Justice of India NV Ramana.

BPF, which is not a part of the ruling alliance in Assam. She was accompanied by BJP's national spokesperson Sambit Patra.

She was sworn in as the 15th President of India on July 25 by Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India NV Ramana. Hailing the President, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma was among the first to take to twitter to congratulate the first ever Tribal to hold the highest constitutional post in the country.

104 Assam MLAs vote for Murmu

Of the total votes received by Droupadi Murmu during the presidential polls, she received the support of 104 legislators from Assam out of the possible 126.

Indigenous Muslim status to five communities

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

The State Cabinet has decided to accord the status of indigenous Muslims to five Assamese Muslim sub-groups: Gorias, Moriyas, Deshis, Jolhas and Syeds.

The Cabinet said that the move will "ensure their development in health, cultural identity, education, financial inclusion, skill development and women empowerment."

The State Cabinet's decision came following the recommendations of a panel constituted by Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma led Assam Government last year to discuss socio-economic issues concerning the Assamese speaking Muslim community of the State.

Welcoming the decision of the Cabinet, Nekibur Zaman, a senior advocate of Gauhati High Court, who has been advocating for indigenous status for Assamese-speaking Muslims since 2006, hailed the decision. He sought a population census of indigenous

Muslims in the State. "There are about 42 lakh indigenous Muslims out of a total population of 1.22 crore Muslims in Assam. The Bengali-speaking Muslims have received benefits of all Government schemes while these subgroups were plainly ignored," he said.

Dr. Mumtaza Khatun, a retired professor of History in Gauhati University stated that this move will "surely help in protecting the identity and culture of Assamese-speaking Muslims living in the State since ages." She said that the recognition as indigenous Assamese is mentally very satisfying.

The panel was set up in July 2021 after the Chief Minister's meeting with leading Assamese Muslims from various fields to discuss socio-economic challenges faced by the community. In the meeting, the Chief Minister emphasised that the "uniqueness of the indigenous Assamese Muslims should be protected and preserved".

The panel consisted of seven sub-committees. The sub-committees formed by the Department of Minority Welfare and Development in the year 2021 studied the cultural identity, education, population control, health services, financial inclusion, skill development, and women's empowerment of the indigenous Assamese Muslims living in the State for a very long time.

For several years, indigenous Muslims in Assam have been seeking a separate classification that distinguishes them from Muslims who migrated to the state from erstwhile East Pakistan (present Bangladesh).

The panel also recommended that a separate Directorate/Authority be set up for Assamese Muslims so that the Directorate could provide the necessary documentation to the people of the Assamese Muslim community to reflect their distinct identity and it may be in the form of an identity card or a certificate.



Musings of a Chief Minister



I, on behalf of the people of Assam, would like to congratulate India's new President Shrimati Droupadi Murmu who was sworn in as the 15th President of the country last week. She is an epitome of simplicity and grace. Her visit to a tea garden in Assam has given us enough reasons to understand that she will be a people's President. It was my honour and that of my Cabinet colleagues to have interacted with her during her visit to our State prior to the presidential polls. I am sure that she will take the dignity and honour of the country to a new high.

Now that the dust has settled down (literally speaking), we will soon be able to assess the damage that the second round of floods have caused in Assam. Whereas houses can be built along with livelihood but not hearth and home once lives are lost. My Government is focused on 'restoring' normalcy at the earliest. I have laid down a detailed action plan to guardian ministers and officials wherein we want to restore everything that was damaged or lost in floods, including livelihood. Statistics present a far grimmer picture than is visible to the local eye. Farmers, traders, students, women & children, and all categories of people have suffered, and suffered extensively. I want to reassure you that the Government of Assam has plunged headlong into the exercise to embalm pain and provide a healing touch. I continue to be grateful for all those who are still coming forward to contribute in their own ways to assist in relief measures. It is this spirit of the people that keeps a government going.

Last month, we were able to fulfil our promise of providing compensation to the employees or family members of Nagaon Paper Mill and Cachar Paper Mill under Hindustan Paper Corporation Limited (HPCL). This, for me, was a momentous occasion when we allowed compassion to precede compensation. I am hopeful that the package will allow them to rehabilitate themselves after the closure of the mills. Some of them, would, of course, be part of the Government in some capacity or the others while others will try and rebuild their lives. I feel saddened at the loss of over a hundred lives since the closure of the mill. We are keen to facilitate the setting up of a paper mill in Cachar by supporting private players, while we intend to expand our administrative capital to Jagoirad for various reasons, which I shall expand on later. Besides, our plan is to have an eight-lane highway connecting Guwahati and Jagoirad whose benefits shall be for all to see. Government spending in Northeast India is very important to keep the wheel of the economy moving. Until such time major industrial projects and service industries are established here, the Government must go all out to invest in infrastructure. It will have a direct bearing on job creation and productivity. Our idea to expand our administrative reach to Jagoirad is partly geared towards that objective. At the same time, we will continue to facilitate investment opportunities in the State.

The recent visit of the Senior Minister of Singapore Tharman Shanmugaratnam to Guwahati was yet another attempt by us to attract foreign and domestic companies to our State. I am hopeful that the Singapore delegation has gone back with a planned perspective of facilitating investment in Assam which will create an ecosystem of entrepreneurship and meaningful employment for our youth. Ever since we were vested with the responsibility of governing the State by the people, my Government has been relentlessly focusing on creating employment opportunities for our youths. We know that there are limitations in generating endless employment opportunities in the Government sector but the private sector is not bound by such a constraint provided the Government of the day creates an enabling atmosphere for them. I can assure them that we are committed to do that.

I am also happy at the positive outcome of the border talks with our neighbour Arunachal Pradesh. The Namsai Declaration for all practical purposes is a declaration of our will and sincerity to solve the festering wound of history, geography, and politics. We all know that we cannot choose our borders but we can certainly exercise our wisdom in maintaining cordiality with our neighbours. This same principle is at work with our Government when dealing with Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram. Respecting the will of the people, and historical realities are the two prime considerations for us whenever we negotiate disputes with our neighbours. I assure the people of Assam that we will not compromise on their interest and that of the State.

Himanta Biswa Sarma
Chief Minister, Assam

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PM hails people's movement in Assam



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the Golden Jubilee of Agradoot Group.

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that public participation has heralded a change for the better in Assam. He said that the people's movement has protected the cultural heritage of Assam and its pride, and it is this movement that is now spearheading a development story of the State. He said this while recalling the journey of the vernacular daily *Dainik Agradoot* which stepped into its golden jubilee year recently.

Addressing the gathering, the Prime Minister termed the newspaper as the 'strong voice of the Northeast in the Assamese language' and complimented it for keeping the values of unity and harmony alive.

He said that under the guidance of its founder editor Kanak Sen Dekha, the newspaper has kept national interest paramount. "Even during the Emergency, when the biggest attack on democracy took place, *Agradoot* and Dekha ji did not compromise on journalistic

values. He created a new generation of value-based journalism", the Prime Minister said.

"Assam has played a key role in the development of language journalism in India. The State has been a very vibrant place from the point of view of journalism. Journalism started 150 years ago in the Assamese language and kept on getting stronger with time", Modi told the gathering in his virtual address.

Talking to *Asom Barta*, Dekha said that the Assamese society has been going through a crucial phase post-the Assam Movement of 1979 wherein several challenges were faced while practising the profession in the State.

Also present on the occasion were Assam Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, his Cabinet colleagues, State Agriculture Minister Atul Bora, Health Minister Keshab Mahanta, Water Resources and I&PR Minister Pijush Hazarika.

Dr. Sarma said that Kanak Sen Dekha has transformed *Dainik Agradoot* as an asset of Assamese society.



Govt sets 20-cr 'Har Ghar Tiranga' target

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

A countrywide preparation has begun to celebrate 75 years of India's Independence, which will be observed as 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav'. Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a clarion call to countrymen to celebrate the Tricolour by hosting it for three days in households across the country from August 13 to August 15. On July 22, 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi recalled the monumental courage and efforts of all those who dreamt of a flag for a free India and urged the people to strengthen the Har Ghar Tiranga Movement.

"This year, when we are marking Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, let us strengthen the Har Ghar Tiranga Movement. Hoist the Tricolour or display it in your homes between 13th and 15th August. This movement will deepen our connect with the national flag," the PM tweeted.

The Government of India is celebrating 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav', from March 12, 2021 till August 15, 2023. To commemorate the occasion, the Government has set a target of hoisting 20 crore flags under Flag Code of India-2002 in every household across the country



on this Independence Day to symbolise our commitment to nation building and to build a spiritual relationship with the national flag.

Meanwhile, preparations are underway to make the event a grand success. In a video conference with chief ministers of all the States and Lieutenant Governors & Administrators of the Union Territories of India on July 17, 2022, Home Minister Amit Shah discussed the implementation of the initiative.

Preparations are afoot in the State towards the celebration. Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma has set a target of hoisting the national flag in 80 lakh households across the State.

The Chief Minister, in a tweet, has directed all deputy commissioners to take necessary measures to hoist the tricolour in every household. Besides, the Chief Minister has used various forums to urge the people of Assam to participate in the 'Har Ghar Tiranga' programme with enthusiasm and pride of being an Indian.

Plastic ban gets a thumbs up

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Do you know the plastic bag that was part of your first shopping experience is still hidden somewhere in the world? This is due to the fact that plastic bags take 20 to 600 years to decompose.

On August 12, 2021, the Government of India issued a Gazette under the 'Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules, which stated that the use of single-use plastics will be phased out from July 1, 2022. Among the many items banned (see box) are all carry bags below 120 microns (effective December 31, 2022).

"We are banning the usage of single-use plastic in two stages. One is public awareness and the other is enforcement. While conducting joint enforcement drives with Urban Local Bodies (ULB) and administration. About 35 plastic manufacturing groups in Assam have already stopped production of banned plastics on our directives," Member Secretary of Pollution Control Board, Assam and State Public Information Officer (SPIO) Shantanu Kumar Dutta told *Asom Barta*.

"This time round we are ready for a strong action. For the first time, a control room has been set up to ban single use plastics. People can contact the control room at 7099027961," he added.

District administrations across Assam have also girded up their loins.



"We have taken steps to ban single-use plastics in Bongaigaon district based on the prescribed policy. If any person or institution violates rules, action will be taken under the Environmental Protection Act, 1986. 'Minimum Plastic, Maximum Environment Protection'- this policy should be followed by every citizen" Bongaigaon DC Nabadip Pathak informed *Asom Barta* through an email conversation.

"We have already sent directives to all markets under the Guwahati Municipal Corporation to ban single-use plastics. We held meetings with the market committees to create awareness among them. In the next phase, if single-use plastic is found in the waste of a market cleaned by municipal corporation workers, the market committee will be held responsible for this," GMC Commissioner Devashish Sharma told this newsletter

Prohibited single use plastics:

- Plastic sticks used in balloons, earbuds, candy, ice cream; Thermocol used in decoration; Plastic plates, cups, glasses, spoons, knives, straws, trays, stirrers; Plastic film used by sweet shops in boxes, invitations, and cigarette packets; Plastic or PVC banners under 100 microns.
- Carry bags currently below 75 microns and from December 31, 2022, below 120 microns.

Non-prohibited single use plastics:

- Plastic cups, trays etc. used for protection, storage and transportation of commercial products; Plastic cups, trays, etc., used in hard plastic packaging.

NGOs like Akshar Foundation are also contributing their bit. A pioneer of recycling plastics, it has been educating the marginalised sections of the society in their school, Akshar Forum. As a fee, each child is required to submit plastic waste to the school every week. "We make eco bricks from these waste plastics." Parmita Sharma, its associate director, told *Asom Barta*. "The ban on disposable plastics is a big step by the Government and will play a major role in pollution control," she added.

Assam, Singapore explore opportunities

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Singapore Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam led a high-level delegation from his country to Assam to explore areas of cooperation with the State. His two-day presence here signalled the importance that the city state was giving to Assam. Fittingly, it was marked by a series of official engagements, including signing of MoUs with some leading business groups of the country.

The Singapore-headquartered Surbana Jurong's Indian arm Jurong Consultants India Pvt Ltd. signed an MoU with Assam Industrial Development Corporation (AIDC) on the first day. Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma and Shanmugaratnam, signed a "Letter of Intent" at a city hotel.

Speaking at the event, the Chief Minister stated that the signing of the "letter of intent" would add strength to the "organic relationship" between Assam and Singapore. Dr. Sarma spoke on the importance of a masterplan to transform Guwahati into a world-class city. He said that the expertise of Surbana Jurong would help in achieving the aim.

He stressed the need for critical infrastructures such as cold-storage, supply-chain infrastructure, and modern modes of transportation, among others.

Mr Shanmugaratnam spoke of possibilities in a post-Covid world. "Now that we have



Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, and his spouse Riniki Bhuyan Sarma with Senior Minister of Singapore Tharman Shanmugaratnam and his wife in Guwahati.

crossed the worst phase of Covid-19 spread, and the world resumes on path to recovery, Assam must utilise its full potential in the field of economic growth," Shanmugaratnam stated, adding: "I am certain we (Singapore and Assam) would be very good partners when it comes to cooperation in each other's field of expertise."

Earlier, he visited Nest, the Assam Start Up. The visiting delegation explored possible areas of cooperation in river connectivity in his interaction with officials of the Transport

Department in the presence of the Chief Minister and some of his Cabinet colleagues.

The Senior Minister visited Sulakuchi, Weaving Centre on the second day of his visit where he interacted with the weavers. During his visit to IIT-G, he visited the institute's Centre for Sustainable Polymer and Nanotechnology before winding up the day with his presence at the North East Skill Centre wherein the ceremonial presentation of "Certificate of Completion" of NESC to ASDC by ITEES, Singapore was held.

‘Govt working to reduce intensity of flood’



Asom Barta (AB) met Minister for Water Resources, IPR, Parliamentary Affairs, Social Justice & Empowerment Pijush Hazarika (PH) to discuss the flood situation and post-flood measures besides working of his other departments. This is an excerpt from the interview.

AB: How challenging has this year's flood compared to the previous year/s?

PH: Flood is a major problem in Assam. I must admit for practical reasons that the problem cannot be solved in a year. However, our Government under a tireless Chief Minister has initiated steps which will go a long way in tackling the menace of floods. I must sound a note of caution here. We cannot stop floods but we can certainly reduce its impact. Our geographical location and topographical reality have placed us in a position wherein rains and water gushing down the hills from neighbouring States are a given happening each year. Therefore, I think that reducing the damage or the intensity of floods is a pragmatic thought process for us.

As I speak to you, I can state that we are yet to get over floods for the season. A good couple of months are still there for the rains to come. Hence, to compare this year with the last year or previous years would be jumping the gun too soon. Yet, I must admit the enormity of the flood was unimaginable, especially in Silchar, Nagaon and Hojai. On the contrary, districts like Morigaon, Dhemaji, which are generally the worst hit districts each year, have escaped major damage. In my constituency Jagiroad, the impact is way too less than previous years. Previously, Morigaon district would remain flooded for months together, but not this year. The plausible reason I see for this is that we constructed a 14-kilometre embankment on the banks of the Brahmaputra River in the district. Similarly, we spent about ₹ 150 crore in Dhemaji last year, of which I must mention the innovative Ready Made Embankment Technology used on the banks of the Jia Dhol River. The reason for this anomaly is the intensity of the rainfall which was one of the reasons for the Dima Hasao landslide.

The Chief Minister had met Water Resources officials and instructed us to study the intensity of the flood in these districts. I think there were technological issues or limitations in our approach which we are now going to address. For example, when we build an embankment, we must have one or more culverts or a sluice gate to lessen the force of flood waters. This, we have learnt from mistakes of the past.

AB: A problem which hardly gets attention is erosion. How do you visualise it?

PH: Oh! It is a major issue for us. There are two steps that we have undertaken. Temporary work and permanent ones. Contrary to the general perception that we work during the floods, the reality is that ours is a Department that needs to work before and during the floods. Temporary works are done from May to September each year while the permanent one begins in November and finishes by April, prior to the onset of heavy rains. We have given ₹ 1 crore each to all districts in the month of May for temporary work. Earlier, this money was given to them in November. This year we had put in place geo bags, launching bags, and porcupines before the onset of floods. I can tell you with confidence that this has saved us from what could have been an even bigger flood this time. Besides, this step has saved embankments and even erosion.

AB: What is the Government's assessment of damage in this year's floods. Some reports have put it at ₹ 3,400 crore, some say even more?

PH: I have already told you there are a good two months more of rain in Assam. Hence, it is premature to point a finger at a figure. Damage assessment is currently on. This is the work of

Assam State Disaster Management Authority and the Revenue Department. Whatever figures you are quoting are imaginary ones and not official figures of the Government of Assam.

AB: Please highlight relief and rescue measures undertaken by the Government during and after the floods.

PH: In my 23 years of political life, out of which I was an MLA for over 11 years and a minister for nearly four-and-a-half years, I have never seen a Chief Minister who could announce cash transfer to the flood-affected from the State Disaster Relief Fund after stepping out of relief camps. The flood-affected families have received ₹ 3,800 for utensils and clothing. He has announced relief of ₹ 98,000 for all those whose houses have been washed away. They will receive the money in August. Grants for books have already been transferred to the account of those who have suffered. This is unprecedented. We are working like 'Team Assam'.

AB: You are trying to reform the Directorate of Information and Public Relations. Can you throw some light on it? For example, regulation on digital media.

PH: On instruction from the Chief Minister, we are working on releasing the pending bills of media houses within a month. Earlier, it would take six months or even more to clear these dues. We have also realised that people are not aware of a lot of government schemes, Hence, we have increased the awareness campaigns. Regarding digital media, we are waiting for the Centre to bring in relevant regulations. Our idea is not to put a leash around the media. We believe any media house will regulate best when it regulates itself.

We'll solve border row with AP by Sept 15: CM



The chief ministers of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam after signing the historic Namsai Declaration.

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Heralding a watershed moment, chief ministers of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma and Pema Khandu respectively signed the Namsai Declaration on July 15, 2022 wherein both the States have resolved to solve the long standing border row between the two neighbours.

The Declaration has called for reduction in the number of disputed villages from the present 123 to 86. Dr Sarma later tweeted that “based on the present boundary, all border disputes between both the States shall be resolved by September 15, 2022”.

In August last year, the Chief Minister had stated in the Assam Assembly that there were at least 1,200 areas of dispute along the border with Arunachal Pradesh. Both the chief ministers met in January and April this year to resolve the row. As a result of these meetings, the two neighbours had decided to constitute 12 regional committees, each covering the 12 districts of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam respectively, for joint verification of 123 villages. These committees were mandated to make recommendations based on the historical perspective, administrative convenience, contiguity, and people's will to delineate the interstate boundary.

The regional committees will submit their first report on the above and any other areas where consensus has arrived, before August 15, 2022.

As part of the Declaration, both States have agreed that the 28 villages which are within the constitutional boundary of Arunachal Pradesh shall remain with Arunachal Pradesh while the three villages, namely Deopani Naga Gaon, Bare Gaon, & Ponton Basti, on which claims were withdrawn by Arunachal Pradesh in 2010 will remain with Assam.

The Declaration states that the location of six villages could not be located on the Assam side. Therefore, if these villages physically exist in Arunachal Pradesh, it shall continue to remain with it.

Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu described the Declaration as a significant and landmark progress towards enduring brotherhood, peace and prosperity in the North East.

The 800-km-long interstate border has been the site of many conflicts since colonial times.

Cabinet okays data policy

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

In continuation of its effort to ensure effective delivery of Government services to the masses, the State Cabinet has approved the Assam State Data Policy 2022. The policy provides for improved access, use, integration & interoperability of data thereby leading to better decision-making, effective tracking of policy implementation and efficient delivery of services.

The rationale of the policy is to make use of the data being generated for evidence-based decision making for targeted public service delivery. “Since data being generated using public funds is growing exponentially and subsequent opportunities for Government data is there, we felt that the State requires a data policy now more than ever before. This will allow real-time monitoring and evaluation of the various flagship schemes of Central and State Governments,” IT Minister Keshab Mahanta told *Asom Barta* in an email response.

“Even though a large quantum of data is generated by various departments, organisations and institutions of the Government, access to such data and digital systems remains confined to individual departments in a largely disconnected manner. There was an absence of cohesion among departments as to how data can be shared, how to make them available for use within and across departments, besides other issues. This impeded the emergence of a data-driven decision-

“**This will allow real-time monitoring and evaluation of the various flagship schemes of Central and State Governments**

Keshab Mahanta, IT Minister



making culture in the Government sector. The new policy will address such issues”, the Minister said.

The ASDP 2022 will enable data-driven governance with data derivatives serving as public good to enhance government efficiency, improve access to quality public services and delivery of citizen centric benefits, and help advance digital transformation. This will also lay the foundation to build a Social Registry for efficient and targeted public service delivery. It will promote data-usage as a value asset across departments, institutions, and autonomous bodies of Government of Assam, thereby contributing to the overall growth strategy for the State.

The Assam State Data Policy 2022 provides the framework and guidelines for collection, collation, processing and storage of data in machine readable format; classification and publishing of open data; secure and restricted access of non-open data across departments towards effective policy formulation and programme implementation. It also aims to secure permission for access of anonymized/ de-identified datasets to entities outside of Government for research and analytical studies aimed at policy design and implementation.

Most Central schemes have Management Information Systems (MIS) in place for monitoring & evaluation through data analytics which is sparingly or not available in the case of State schemes. In many cases, data generated by departments are not ‘cross-talking systems’ which results in duplicity and estimation errors in beneficiary identification, among others.

Work on the ASDP 2022 began on April 19 this year with the constitution of a committee under Anurag Goel, Principal Secretary, Department of Information Technology. The committee's mandate was to lay down the principles and direction for data accessibility and use it to promote data as a value asset for data-driven governance and thereby contributing to the overall growth strategy for Assam.

ASDP, 2022

- Framework and guidelines for collection, collation, processing, and storage of data in machine readable format.
- Classification and publishing of open data.
- Secure and restricted access of non-open data across departments towards effective policy formulation and programme implementation.
- Secure access of anonymized/de-identified data sets through proper permission to entities outside of government for bona fide research and analytical studies aimed at policy design and implementation.

Major boost for minority students



Masuma Begum at her study table

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Masuma Begum, a class 11 student of Dharapur Higher Secondary School and Kasmira Begum, a Class 10 student of Dimoria Higher Secondary School in Kamrup (Metro), have realised that hard work pays. They have good reason to feel that way having received special scholarships of ₹ 4,000 and ₹ 2,000 respectively.

"My father is a driver by profession. This scholarship from the Education Department has given us some relief. I have used the money to buy textbooks and other necessities. I am grateful to the Government for encouraging and empowering students like me", Masuma told *Asom Barta*.

Kasmira is also delighted. "I am very happy to be able to buy necessary items with the money. Such schemes will encourage students to study hard," she said.

- Applicants can apply for the assistance through the website of the Directorate of Secondary Education www.madhyamik.assam.gov.in or by downloading the "Bidyarthi" mobile app from the Google Play Store.
- The Directorate of Secondary Education received 22,184 applications for the year 2021-22 and after completion of the monitoring process, 21,661 beneficiaries were found eligible.
- Verification of the bank accounts of the beneficiaries have been conducted by Sarba Shiksha Abhiyan, Assam.

The "Scholarship scheme for girl children from the minority community" was announced during the 2018-19 Budget session for those studying in classes 10, 11 & 12 to enable them to continue their education and be a part of the formal education system.

This scheme provides ₹ 2,000 per annum to students of religious minority communities i.e. Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains and Parsis in Class 10 and ₹ 4,000 per annum to students in classes 11 and 12, under Section 2(c) of the National Minorities Commission Act, respectively.

Recently, 21,661 minority community students studying in government, provincialised and private sector schools under the Government of Assam were offered special scholarships for the year 2021-22 through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) process. The Department of Secondary Education, the nodal department under the scheme, disbursed ₹ 6.86 crore to beneficiaries.

Pragyan Bharati empowers students

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

The Education Department has released a grant of ₹ 35.43 crore at the rate of ₹ 1,000 each to 3,54,341 undergraduate students across Assam for purchase of textbooks under the Pragyan Bharati Scheme.

During the 2019-20 Budget session of Government of Assam, the then Finance Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma announced the provision of free textbooks to undergraduate students of the State. Later, it was amended and the State Government decided to provide ₹ 1,000 each to the undergraduate students through direct benefit transfer for the purchase of textbooks.

Bishal Barman, the son of a farmer and a sixth semester graduate student of Abhayapuri College, Bongaigaon, is one among these students. "Last month, ₹ 1,000 was deposited in my bank account. Since I had already purchased textbooks prior to receiving the amount, I am now thinking of buying guidebooks for competitive examinations later," he told *Asom Barta*.

₹ 1,000 book grant to all flood-affected students: CM

Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma has announced a special book grant to 1,01,539 flood-affected students of the State.

An amount of ₹ 1,000 each from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund shall be transferred to the bank accounts of the students through direct benefit transfer.

Another beneficiary of the scheme is Dipankar Sarma, a sixth semester graduate student of Bagadhar Brahma Kishan College in Baksa district. He, too, is the son of a farmer. "I am very happy to receive the amount. However, I had already purchased some textbooks. I had to buy a few more. I thank the Government for empowering us," he said.

100 years of sports journalism

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Assam Assembly Speaker Biswajit Daimary inaugurated a year-long celebration programme of 100 years of sports journalism in Assam. The programme is being celebrated in the State under the aegis of the Assam Sports Journalists' Association.

The first ever sports report in Assam was published on July 1, 1923 in a daily called *Asomiya* published from Dibrugarh.

Over 100 working and former sports journalists of the State were honoured in the presence of Asian Games medallist Joydeep Das, Monalisa Barua Mehta, the first woman recipient of the Arjuna Award from the North East, Olympian Anuradha Biswal and former national table tennis champion Kamlesh Mehta, et al.

The Assam Assembly Speaker spoke of the importance of journalism in the making of a sportsperson. This was echoed by other speakers, including Kamlesh, who recounted his first media coverage, and the urge in him thereafter to do better.

Daimary spoke on the importance of indigenous games and the responsibility of the media in highlighting those.

Krishnendu Paul (MLA, No. 2 Patharkandi Legislative Assembly Constituency)

What is the role of the Government of Assam towards the holistic development of your Legislative Assembly constituency?

Our Government led by Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma is proactive in expediting holistic development of Assembly constituencies. Even opposition MLAs are being given equal importance. I believe such initiatives will soon make Assam one of the top 5 States in the country.

Can you give us a glimpse about the various activities undertaken in your constituency regarding construction of roads, infrastructure development, development of religious institutions, including Namghars, etc.?

Work is currently underway in the entire Barak Valley to improve communication and transport, including air, water and road transport. Paved roads are now being constructed in rural areas. The Assam Darshan initiative has boosted development of religious places. Besides, three Tea Estate Model Schools have been inaugurated in my constituency and construction of a Model College is on.

The devastating floods in the Barak Valley were unexpected. What is your opinion on the role taken by the State Government in providing relief and assistance to the flood victims? What are the plans for rehabilitation in the flood affected areas of your constituency?

The Chief Minister has been at the forefront in overseeing relief efforts by visiting the Barak Valley thrice, interacting with the DCs through video conferencing. The family of the deceased were provided with financial assistance of ₹ 4 lakh within a week while other measures for the flood-affected have been announced across the State. The Patharkandi dam which collapsed under the weight of the floodwaters will be rebuilt.



Rupesh Gowala (MLA, No. 125 Doom Dooma Legislative Assembly Constituency)

What is the role of the Government of Assam towards the holistic development of your Legislative Assembly constituency?

Our Chief Minister is committed towards holistic development of all constituencies of Assam. In my experience, whenever MLAs discuss problems of their constituencies with the Chief Minister, he takes immediate steps to resolve the issue.

Can you give us a glimpse about the various activities undertaken in your constituency regarding construction of roads, infrastructure development, development of religious institutions, including Namghars, etc.?

Steps have been taken to develop 11 model anganwadi centres in Doom Dooma constituency and the rest will be developed in the next phase. Under the 'Assam Darshan' scheme, ₹ 2.50 lakh each has been provided to 67 Namghars in my constituency so far. Construction of a Primary Health Centre has been completed in Tangana and two more are coming up. A 10 kilometre road has been constructed in Doom Dooma under RIDF; we are targeting a total of 60 kilometre road construction. Although we have also taken measures to prevent flooding in Baghjan, we need to do more.

What is your view on the Government of Assam's role in promoting education in tea gardens? Further, what steps have been taken to employ tea workers under MGNREGA?

The establishment of model schools in tea garden areas is a breakthrough initiative to promote education. The seven model schools established in our constituency, along with the model college in Doom Dooma, will uplift education in the area. Once the plucking season in the tea gardens is over, temporary workers generally sit idle for four months. The Chief Minister has undertaken steps to provide employment to them under MGNREGA. This year we hope to provide employment to 100% of such workers.



Department Snapshots



AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Here is a brief round-up of the activities of various departments:

Power:

- Assam's first solar power plant set up under Assam Solar Energy Policy, 2017 on a 'Build, Own, Operate' model was inaugurated by Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma in the presence of Power Minister Nandita Gorlosa on July 19, 2022 at Lalpul, Udalguri.
- A 25-MW Boko Solar Park at Bhalukghata was inaugurated by the Chief Minister on July 20, 2022 at Boko, Kamrup. The Power Minister was also present on the occasion.

Science, Technology & Climate Change

- Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma launched the Chief Minister's Institutional Plantation Programme (CMIPP) by planting a sapling at Janata Bhawan on July 17. The programme will continue till August 15. It is an initiative of the Science, Technology and Climate Change Department. The CMIPP will cover more than 80,000 institutional campuses under the Government of Assam.

Handloom & Textile:

- Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma launched the Swanirbhar Naari scheme in Guwahati in the presence of Handloom & Textile Minister Urkhao Gwra Brahma. The State Government will procure handloom items directly from them through an online portal.

NESC starts counting its success



(Left) Ankur Jain (MD, ASDM) and Lim Boon Tiong (COO, ITEES-Singapore) at the handover ceremony of North East Skill Centre in Guwahati.

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Dulumoni Barman, Suraj Upadhaya, and Pranjeet Bora are flag bearers of quality technical and vocational education training in Assam courtesy the North East Skill Centre (NESC), an initiative of the Assam Skill Development Mission (ASDM) and ITE Education Services (ITEES), Singapore.

Dulumoni from Bongaigaon in lower Assam is a multi-faceted talent with a soft corner for drama and dance, and a hardcore beauty and wellness professional. Employed in Fresco Spa under the Lemon Tree group of hotels in Patna, her skill sets have earned her immense appreciation. Her talent was harnessed methodically at the NESC wherein she underwent a one-year course in beauty and wellness and an outdoor exposure, arranged by the NESC, at Hotel Novotel in Guwahati.

Suraj from Biswanath in North Assam is a passionate sportsman in his heart but has all the features of a soft spoken service industry professional. He is employed in the food and beverage (F&B) department at DoubleTree, Bangalore run by the Hilton Group.

The Dulumonis, Surajs and Pranjeets have given enough reasons to the Skill, Employment and Entrepreneurship Department of the Government of Assam to be hopeful of a momentous shift in generating skill-based employment, away from the Government sector, in the country as well as overseas,

besides encouraging an ecosystem of entrepreneurship.

A beaming Ankur Jain, the Managing Director of Assam Skill Development Mission says, "Our State has been emphasising skill development programmes. Today, if you think of a good career for yourself, proper skill development training is a must."

He says that the upcoming Skill University at Mangaldoi in Darrang district will be a game changer in skilling Assam's youth for jobs the world over. "Industries need skilled manpower. Our university will generate tens of thousands of skilled manpower in the years to come."

His confidence possibly stems from the two batches of students who have been absorbed by various industry groups across the country and the likes of Dulumoni who is advocating for girls like her to join NESC. "Learning at the NESC helped me a lot. I would like to suggest girls, particularly in rural areas, to avail the vocational training course there. It will help them get jobs," Dulumoni says over the phone from Patna.

Part of the credit for this initial success of NESC also goes to the Singapore-based group ITEES which had handhold the Centre for over five years after signing an MoU in October 2016, before its COO Lim Boon Tiong handed it formally to the ASDM MD in Guwahati this month. The ceremony was marked by the presence of Singapore Senior

Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, SEED Minister, Government of Assam, Jayanta Malla Barua, Industry and Commerce Minister Bimal Bora, High Commissioner of Singapore in India, Simon Wong, and Principal Secretary, SEED, and Labour Department, B Kalyan Chakravarthy.

The ITEES is the principal provider of technical education in Singapore at the technician or semi-professional level, and the principal authority for national occupational skill certification and standards. It has been supporting NESC by providing technical assistance on campus design and building, design of facilities, curriculum design and development, training of the trainers, centre management staff and supervisors.

NESC offers specialised skill development training in four verticals 'Beauty and Wellness', 'Retail Services', 'Food and Beverage Service' and Hospitality Operations-cum-Housekeeping, in which Pranjeet, hailing from North Lakhimpur, has trained himself. He joined Radisson Blu, Gwalior as a guest service associate (GSA) after his course and is now with the same hotel chain in Guwahati. "I spent about ₹ 1.5 lakh, including ₹ 48,000 as course fee, to complete my course. My salary is now double than what I had expended to complete my course. We are lucky that the Government has set up an institute like NESC in the State," he says.

Compensation @ Compassion



Assam Chief Minister handing over compensation package to a former HPC employee in Guwahati.

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

It was a night which the then Industry and Commerce Minister of the Government of Assam and a veteran politician Chandra Mohan Patowary says he will never forget. “It was around 1.30am of September 28, 2021. We were negotiating with the workers’ union of the Hindustan Paper Corporation on the compensation package. We arrived at an agreement. I informed the Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma who told me to finalise the deal. I did. It was around 5.30am. The Chief Minister came and signed it. I was astounded. In one go, a Chief Minister was willing to spend ₹ 800 crore to achieve a breakthrough and move forward. In my political career of more than 40-years, I have never seen a Chief Minister being so decisive when the stakes are so high,” Patowary recalled while speaking during the distribution ceremony of relief package to ex-employees and workmen of the defunct Nagaon paper mill and Cachar paper mill of Hindustan Paper Corporation Limited (Liquidated) in a programme in Guwahati.

This decisive action of the Assam Chief Minister brought tears of joy to almost all of the 2,751 employees of both the mills, including 748 contractual workers of the two mills. One among them was Nazmin Sultana, daughter of Abdul Nur who died of cancer in 2021.

“Once the mill closed in 2017, we were forced to spend our savings to run the household and on his treatment. We exhausted our savings in no time. We had to stop his treatment. I was a final year student of LLB when my father died. The financial package offered to us by the Assam Government is a fresh start for us,” Nazmin told *Asom Barta*.

Dr. Nirmal Kumar Sinha, a former physician of Nagaon paper mill, was another beneficiary. “I have an emotional attachment with the employees of Nagaon paper mill. I was there from 1995 to 2017. The trouble began in 2012 when the management started defaulting

RELIEF FOR HPC EMPLOYEES

“The financial package offered to us by the Assam Government is a fresh start for us”

on timely release of salaries. I was fortunate to have merely defaulted on my LIC policies. Some had to sell their ornaments,” the doctor recalled. He is now with the Assam Cancer Care Foundation at its Kokrajhar Hospital.

This humanitarian gesture of the Assam Government would result in an outgo of ₹ 810.02 crore from the exchequer.

Speaking on the occasion, Chief Minister Dr. Sarma said that the Assam Government took this step considering the hardship the ex-employees, workmen and their families had to endure due to non-operation of the mills since the last few years.

“When the BJP-led Government came to power in the State, we took several steps such as providing free electricity, scholarships to children of the former employees, etc. When we were elected for a second term, a decision was taken to buy both the paper mills following guidance from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah to address the issues faced by the families of the ex-employees,” the Chief Minister said in his speech.

Dr Sarma informed the gathering that during the intervening period, the State Government had held several rounds of discussions with the employees’ union of both the paper mills and decided to pay net salary and wages to the employees and workmen that were due till the time of closure of the paper mills, while also providing employment to eligible employees of the mills in the State Government.

Additional inputs

- HPC was formed on May 29, 1970.
- 107 employees of HPC have died after its two mills in Cachar and Nagaon became non-operational. While the Cachar unit stopped functioning in October 2015, the Nagaon mill in Jagiroad became defunct in March 2017.
- On March 28, 2022: After a long and sustained effort, the State Government took over assets of HPC Nagaon and Cachar paper mills by paying ₹ 375 Crore through a transparent bidding process.
- Both Nagaon Paper Mill (NPM) and Cachar Paper Mill (CPM) had a capacity of 1,00,000 Metric Tonnes Per Annum (MTPA) at each mill.

He announced that his Government would put in efforts for opening a new paper mill at the plot of land of the Cachar Paper Mill, while the land of the Nagaon Paper Mill would be utilised for expansion of the State capital region.

Dr Sarma said that under this relief package a trust would be created with an outlay of ₹ 25 crore which would be utilised for medical benefit, educational support, social assistance, etc., of the ex-employees and workmen.

Dispur has already initiated steps for providing employment to 84 eligible ex-employees of the mills in the State Government. The Chief Minister distributed appointment letters to 66 employees on the occasion.

Scrappage policy eyes multiple benefits



AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Amiya Mishra, a retired government servant and Dilip Goenka, an industrialist, have never met and have even not heard of each other. Soon, though, they will have some sort of a connection, and a symbiotic relationship to boot although they may still remain oblivious of each other. Mishra’s old car, an i10, may land up at the yet to be completed Registered Vehicle Scrapping Facilities (RVSF) of Goenka, wherein the latter will suitably compensate the former based on the guidelines of the Assam Government’s Vehicle Scrappage Policy 2022.

The policy is aimed to bring in multiple benefits ranging from easing traffic congestion to reducing environment pollution through reduced usage of non-renewable energy sources.

“The continued usage of old vehicles and the ensuing traffic problem has contributed immensely towards environmental pollution and excessive use of non-renewable energy sources. Moreover, non-scientific vehicle scrappage practices also contribute towards environmental damage by way of water/air/soil pollution along with unsafe working conditions for workers,” the policy note reads.

Transport Minister Parimal Suklabaidya told *Asom Barta* that an absence of a scrappage policy in Assam was being felt for a long time. “Even if the owner of a vehicle wanted his vehicle to go for scrapping, there was no formal way to do it. Now, vehicle owners will get the right price for their old vehicles and contribute to pollution control and fuel conservation,” the Minister said. “This policy along with the Electric Vehicle Policy will change the existing landscape. Scientific scrap will generate raw materials for many industries, which will have a positive impact on the economy.”

There are about 10 lakh vehicles older than 15 years, also known as End of Life Vehicle (ELV) in Assam. An additional 8 lakh vehicles will join this segment in the next five years. The policy mandates that vehicles without registration certificates, fitness certificates, and those belonging to government, public sector, government agencies and autonomous council which are older than 15 years shall have to be compulsorily scrapped. Besides, vehicles damaged in collisions, fires, natural disasters and accidents, vehicles under listed categories of Scrappage Policy, 2022 will be consigned to scrapping facilities, which are due to come up across Assam, based on guidelines laid down by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH).

Under the policy, it will be compulsory for heavy vehicles to obtain fitness certificates from automated testing stations from April

1, 2023 and for medium weight vehicles and light vehicles from June 1, 2024.

“The Policy will pave the way for a circular economy while preventing pollution,” Transport Department Commissioner Adil Khan told *Asom Barta*. “If a vehicle owner brings a vehicle for scrapping, he will get a Certificate of Deposit in addition to the fixed price. This will entitle her to get 25% and 15% exemption in vehicle tax for non-transport and transport vehicles respectively and full exemption in registration fee for a new one. For a new electric vehicle against submission of “Certificate of Deposit”, the concession shall be in addition to the tax exemption available under the Electric Vehicle Policy of Assam, 2021 on the balance tax.

The Transport Department will also launch a ‘One-Time Settlement’ scheme for vehicle owners to voluntarily give up their vehicles for scrapping. They will get a tax waiver up to 75% against their outstanding arrear/dues (if any). “All non-scientific scrapping practices will be stopped. Government vehicles older than 15 years will be scrapped by next December,” Khan added.

Goenka’s RVSF is coming up in Rangia if all goes well. The Assam Government has meanwhile promised power and generator set subsidies, 100% reimbursement of State GST, among others for entrepreneurs under its policy.

“I thank the Chief Minister for his vision in giving industry status to registered vehicle scrap establishments. We signed an MoU with the Government of Assam on September 3, 2021 for setting up an RVSF weeks after the Prime Minister announced the National Scrappage Policy,” he said.

However, Misra is in no hurry to dispose of his car just yet although he says the policy is a welcome move with the right intent.

SALIENT FEATURES

Reduce pollution by scrapping old and unfit vehicles

Improve road, passenger and vehicular safety

Improve fuel efficiency and reduce maintenance cost for vehicle owners

Formalise the currently informal vehicle recycling industry in Assam

Promoting recycling of vehicle scrap in a scientific manner

Promoting a circular economy in an eco-friendly manner

Encourage setting up of RVSF

Fruity tales from Nagaland

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Assam is well endowed with plethora of indigenous fruits like Yellow Plum or Mirabelle Plum (Xoon Bogori), Green Peach (Nora Bogori), Pomelo (Robab Tenga), Java Plum (Jamu), Indian coffee plum (Ponial), Hog Plum (Omora), White Mulberry (Nuni), Burmese Grape (Leteku), Rose Apple (Bogi Jamu), Bastard Myrobalan (Bhumura), Bullet Wood fruit (Bokul) and many more. Not only do these exotic indigenous fruits taste delicious they also have the potential to capture the international market thereby empowering the farmers. To do so, the State can borrow a leaf out of neighbouring Nagaland, and that, too, from the effort of an NGO.

Under its ambitious mission of 'Trees for Wealth' (TfW) launched in 2019, the Entrepreneurs Associates (tEA), an NGO in Nagaland, has envisioned the State as the 'Fruit Hub of India. It aims to plant 2 million fruit trees by 2025 thereby empowering 10,000 farmers and impacting 200 villages across the State.

The NGO is of the view that the North-Eastern States can significantly augment their revenue by planting fruit trees and thereby making use of the rich biodiversity of the region. It feels that since most ethnic communities of the region have fragmented land holding, individuals cannot take up mass cultivation of fruit trees. However, if done collectively, they can arrive at a critical mass and the required scale to make it profitable.

Hence tEA innovated a model "Micro by One, Volume by Mass" where the idea is to have 1 million farmers planting 100 fruit trees each. This makes it 10 crore fruit trees. If income from this effort inspires individuals to plant on an average 1,000 such trees, then 1 million people planting 1,000 trees will make it 100 crore fruit trees. A back of the envelope calculation shows that this can propel the region to add Rs 1 trillion into the economy with one fruit tree generating ₹ 1,000 per annum.

The movement has been instrumental in introducing quick fruit yielding trees like plum, orange, lime, guava, persimmon, avocado, mango, fig, tamarillo (Naga tree tomato), walnut, pears, litchi, etc., so that farmers in Nagaland can harvest early and start earning. This is projected to motivate them to adopt fruit tree plantation as a viable long-term livelihood. Since the launch of the movement, 4.6 lakh fruit trees have been planted. It is targeting an additional 5 lakh trees by the end of 2022. The movement is expected to create opportunities in logistics, cold storage and food processing industries and generate 5 million jobs in the region.

Speaking to *Asom Barta*, Neichute Doulo, CEO (the Entrepreneurs Associates) says, "Planting 1 billion fruit trees will be our small contribution to reverse climate change and restore our environment. tEA innovated the



Farmers planting fruit trees under Trees for Wealth initiative in Nagaland.

Under its ambitious mission of 'Trees for Wealth' (TfW), the Entrepreneurs Associates (tEA), an NGO in Nagaland, envisions the state as the 'Fruit Hub of India' by planting two million fruit trees by 2025, empowering 10,000 farmers and impacting 200 villages across the State.

Trees for Wealth (TfW) movement because unlike planting any tree, planting fruit trees generate cash income for farmers which, in turn, can facilitate their children's education and provide economic security to people in the villages."

He said that he was even willing to travel to other States to share his knowledge with the people.

"Assam can also take up this movement.

We will be more than happy to come and share how it should be people-led and not Government-led with the Government acting as a facilitator. We are open to collaboration with interested NGOs (or even Government departments) who want to take up fruit tree plantations," he adds.

In an email conversation with *Asom Barta*, fruit farmer Thejoso Kezo from Phek District, Nagaland credits the Trees for Wealth movement for getting his life back on track. A school dropout, he was wondering what to do with his life when he came across the TfW movement.

"I dropped out of school. I came across tEA's movement for Trees for Wealth by planting fruit trees. tEA helped me with poly bags and green shade for the fruit tree nursery last year. This year alone, I have earned around ₹ 2 lakh by selling fruit tree saplings," he says. He said that he was planting up to 1,000 Persimmon fruit trees, 500 Tamarillo fruit trees and 1,000 Plum fruit trees this year. He was hopeful that this will give him significant income after a few years and help him build a house in his village and get married. "The TfW has made me self-employed. I thank tEA for showing me the way to use my village land which I thought was almost useless," Kezo says.

Commanding zero-cost farming

AB BUREAU, GUWAHATI

Agriculture is fast turning out to be a career option for many across the country and Assam thanks to agripreneurs and mavericks like Samir Bordoloi. Bordoloi, widely known across India as 'Farmer Samir Bordoloi', has been instrumental in bringing the youth back to their roots in the fields.

He secured a well-paying job in a multinational corporation immediately after his graduation from Assam Agricultural University. Life seemed settled for him. But something that he saw in the food industry disturbed his young mind. He saw the alarming impact of chemical fertilisers, and pesticides on the farming communities. Samir discovered that a direct connection between farmers and the consumers was missing. This he made his lifelong mission: To promote organic farming

and serve the many farmers of India in a way that is dignified, aspirational, healthy, and fair.

Samir quit his corporate job in 2015 and opened his first plant health clinic called SS Botanicals in Jorhat. Like others, he, too, realised the intensity at which traditional food wisdom is vanishing and the pace at which food insecurity is growing due to unsustainable farming practices. In 2017, he established the Society for Promotion of Rural Economy & Agricultural Development, North East (Spread NE), an NGO that brings together youth from every section of the society to create awareness among farmers about local food and organic farming.

The concept of 'Green Commandos' emerged out of this necessity. These commandos are the preachers as well as the bridges connecting farmers with the consumers for a healthy and lasting relationship. These commandos sensitise the consumer as well.

Samir started training the green commandos at a food forest in Sonapur, which is also their camp. His idea of farming is one formulated into a simple principle: 'Local People - Local Food - Local Economy'. This principle is borne out of the need to create awareness against exploitation of local farmers by big agro-based companies. He feels that local farmers are not paid commensurately for their work. Samir has trained 786 green commandos hitherto.

Spread NE attracts these commandos not just from Assam but also Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and other parts of India. For those commandos who live in or have ties with urban families, their 'mission' is to promote the consumption of local, indigenous and organic food among them.

Whether it is promotion among big groups or a casual conversation over tea at a relative's place, green commandos persuade families to adopt a farmer from the village. Under this arrangement, these families can receive a year's worth of herbs and other produce

“

'Farmer' Samir Bordoloi's idea of farming is formulated into a simple principle: Local People - Local Food - Local Economy. This principle is borne out of the need to create awareness against exploitation by big agro-based companies.

”



'Farmer' Samir Bordoloi



Bordoloi training a batch of green commandos at Spread NE Food Forest at Sonapur.

from the farmers. Each farmer is associated with several families who buy their produce exclusively from her/him. The farmer is free to sell the surplus in the market or use it for value-added activity.

In a bid to connect the commandos directly to the farmers, Samir began an initiative called 'Farm Connect' wherein the former train the latter at the local level and also market their products in cities.

"The food industry is one of the most profitable in India and yet, the farmer is the one who starves. With Spread NE, the farmer gets an assured income of about ₹ 15,000 per month. They generally go to cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Delhi for petty jobs at half of this amount. Now with this initiative, at least they are living where they belong", he told *Asom Barta*.

Since 2017, Samir and his team of Green Commandos have adopted over 150 schools. They teach students in making vermicompost, the importance of organic farming and the need to grow and consume local food products.

On the first day of the World Environment Week observed last month, over 54,000 schoolchildren across Meghalaya took to an innovative way to rejuvenate degraded forests by dispersing over 2.3 lakh seed balls, a campaign which bears his signature.

Bordoloi's efforts have not gone unnoticed. He received the Pragati Puraskar in 2016 from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the All India Agricultural Students' Association. He also received an award for the Best Agripreneur of the Country from the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare in 2017. In 2018, he was awarded the Krishak Ratna Award by the Assam Agricultural University (AAU). He has also received the Innovative Farmer Award of the country in 2019 from the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI).

However, for him the best award is the growing crop of young enthusiasts he has commanded.



Droupadi Murmu while campaigning for the presidential polls in Assam.



Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma with a delegation of Muktiyoddhas from Bangladesh in Guwahati.



Health Minister Keshab Mahanta launching the 75-day special vaccine drive at Azara Block PHC in Kamrup district.



Assam Tiranga Pride: The Tricolour flying high at Lachit Maidam, the burial mound of the legendary Ahom general Lachit Borphukan.



The first consignment of organic pineapples produced by the Hmar Agro Organic Producer Company Limited, Cachar, being exported to Karnataka.

Personality Development & Education

It has been 75 years since India gained independence but some ideas have not changed yet. For example, in the past our education system emphasised producing salaried professionals. Even today, our students do not get to study personality development at the college level, even though that is the best time to enhance their mental development.

The recently introduced New Education Policy (NEP) is expected to bring about radical changes in the education sector. The old-fashioned education system did not teach us much. Thus, even after acquiring a degree, a student has to pursue further studies to gain professional and practical skills. Even today, subjects like mass communication and journalism, food processing, tourism, photography, social service, etc., with immense potential for upskilling youth and enhancing their career development do not find a place in our higher secondary curriculum.

As a personality development trainer, I have realised that even though teachers emphasise the need for self-confidence, time management, body language, use of subconscious mind at college level, nothing is done at the ground level to inspire the young minds.

There exists a culture of giving importance and attention to students with good prospects in various examinations. However, students who do not perform well are left to fend for themselves. Creating a new environment for such students is the need of the hour. If new subjects are not incorporated into the education system, it is futile to compare our human resources with that of other nations. This is akin to organising an annual 'Yuva Mahotsav'.

I hope the Education Department will realise the need for practical education as well as classroom education in today's fast-changing world. It remains to be seen how the New Education Policy addresses these issues.

Dr. Sainen Das
Mirza

Corrigendum

In our July edition, we had inadvertently missed out on the portfolios of the following Cabinet Ministers of Government of Assam:

- 1. Shri Ranjeet Kumar Dass: Law and Justice.
- 2. Dr. Ranoj Pegu: Welfare of Plain Tribe and Backward Classes.

Editor,
Asom Barta

Write to us with your opinion and suggestions at bartaasom@gmail.com



Biomedical Assets of Assam

One of the underlying factors in the rapid development of modern medicine is the unprecedented advances made in the field of biomedical engineering. Simply put, biomedical engineering acts as the bridge between medicine and technology. Biomedical engineering is a vast and versatile field that covers all possible aspects ranging from the application of artificial intelligence in healthcare to artificial organs, robotic surgery, medical devices and equipment R&D. A small part of this is clinical engineering or application of biomedical engineering in hospitals.

Although the importance of clinical engineering in upgrading the health infrastructure is immense, the department has not received proper and adequate recognition in India. According to a report by the World Health Organisation, the department's functioning in our country is still mainly limited to corrective maintenance. Lack of adequate human resources may be another reason, the agency said in the report. Recently, institutions like IBSC, sponsored by the Quality Council of India, seem to have largely alleviated this shortage of human resources.

According to data from the National Health Systems Resource Centre, a technology support agency of the National Health Mission, 34% of medical devices were found to be out of order in States across India. Under such circumstances, the development of the health sector will be much slower if it relies solely on corrective maintenance.

Procedures like Preventive Maintenance are also of immense importance to keep the expensive equipment functioning properly. Not going too far, a look at the maintenance statistics of the Biomedical Assets of the Government of Assam in Public-Private Partnerships provides visual evidence of what has been pointed out by WHO. Systematic practice for sustainable development and improved infrastructure in the health sector is the need of the hour and this can only be achieved through the establishment of permanent biomedical engineering departments in hospitals.

Uddipta Bora
Dhing, Nagaon

Formation of SMCs

Every school or educational institution has a school management committee (SMC) to supervise its various functions. However, with changing times, the formation and features of these committees must also change.

Representatives from among parents, as well as a prominent person from the community should be included in the formation of the SMC and given prominence. However, when selecting a social worker, emphasis should be placed on his/her influence in the society. This will have a direct bearing on the schools.

Nowadays, the government has delegated the responsibility of every district to a Guardian Minister. Their dedicated efforts have resulted in expediting various development works in the district. Similarly, the Government should include a leading person from the community to form the SMC. Emulating the Guardian Ministers model, the Government may decide to entrust such persons with the responsibility of 'Guardians' of the school. Such persons can present the problems and various aspects of the school to authorities concerned.

Schools play a pivotal role in developing the human resources of an area. If the SMC is strong, the school will reinforce the trust of parents and students in the area, while resulting in higher enrolment. A lot has been commented regarding the recently declared HSLC results and infrastructure in government schools. If locals are given the opportunity to take the lead, schools will reap benefits in the future.

However, there have been many instances of self-gratification in the formation of SMCs in some schools. In many schools, head teachers or principals name their relatives in these SMCs. This can easily be avoided in the majority of cases. Once the SMCs are formed, their personal details must be in public domain for transparency and rooting out nepotism.

Gopal Jalan
Guwahati

EDITORIAL

Solving the Border Row

Borders are man-made geographical constructs whose destiny lies in the hands of people. Almost all nations that have ever come into existence since times immemorial have struggled to have a settled border. A cursory glance through the pages of history, written by either the victors or the vanquists, shows that the question of geographical expansion which in one sense means shifting of the border has occupied the centrestage.

The problem is especially severe when it comes to countries which have been colonised. India, being no exception. North East India, too, is an example of this. The British, who were out to exploit the resources of the region, left our borders unorganised and undemarcated, something which was part of a bigger design. The impasse continued even in post-Independent India. States in the region, especially neighbours, have been struggling to have their demarcated boundaries. The complexities in the approach is such that successive Governments at the Centre have not been able to solve claims arising from various quarters. The result is that we are still fighting to get these anomalies corrected. It is in the light of this that the recent attempts by the Governments of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh to settle disputes regarding its contiguous borders must be appreciated.

The Namsai Declaration as the document is called has been signed in a spirit of bonhomie and pragmatism. The Declaration has called for reduction in the number of disputed villages from the present 123 to 86. The Assam Chief Minister has also resolved to settle the dispute by September 15. Based on experience of the recent past, it seems that we are all set to embalm the pains of history and politics.

Assam's problem is unique in the sense that it shares boundaries with all the other Northeastern States. Hence, it is no surprise that it has land disputes with its neighbours. However, the present Government, unlike previous dispensations, has shown unprecedented eagerness to get the border dispute solved. The efforts with Meghalaya being another example. Yes, there were unsavoury developments at the Mizoram border in the recent past, but one must appreciate that history extracts a price if one wants to rewrite it.

Consumption of Culture

by Jahnu Barua



Culture is food for thought which keeps humanity alive. A human being needs food to survive. But given a choice, he would ideally prefer a healthy diet than just any food. A healthy culture is akin to good food, while activities that masquerade as culture may have complications for a human being and the society. If not cultivated well, a human mind could end up being a Frankenstein monster.

The advancement in technology has led to a spurt in activities pervading all aspects of our lives, including culture. This is bewildering and harmful. It is preventing a distinction that ought to be there between cultural practices and its gainful understanding from production of culture and its mass consumption. As parents and guardians, it is enjoined on us to provide a healthy and balanced diet to our children and prevent them from becoming obese, physiologically and psychologically. Put to effective use, culture is a panacea for all societal ills, but damaging when left unattended.

Governments and kingdoms across centuries have been patronizing culture in their best wisdom, and so have its practitioners. Because it was a well thought out activity in the times gone by, culture had a salubrious effect on the soul. Post-Industrial Revolution, more so post-Globalisation when commercial 'culture' has come into being, its efficacy has waned.

In a globalised world, the government is merely one more actor in the cultural domain. Conventionally, it is going about its business of patronizing culture with scant regard to its outcome. Therefore, what we see today around us is an unhealthy harvest and social chaos.

One of the prime examples of how culture needs to be cultivated in sync with reality without being didactic was shown by Assam's greatest reformer Srimanata Sankardev. Born during the middle of the 15th century, when there was very limited patronage to culture in any forms because of the socio-political realities of his time, Sankardeva set out to study society in detail. He studied the Ahom kingdom, and its neighbours. He could sense that the ecosystem required for a cultural wave was non-existent. He then set out to travel westward to understand the renaissance that other regions around India were going through. His scholarship made him understand quickly that religion was being used as the primary connection to people's civilizational aspects.

His contemporaries like Nanak, Chaitanya, Surdas, Kabir were freely and effectively using religious beliefs to bring order to a chaotic society after the Islamic invasion, beginning in the middle of the 8th century, had brought about instability into an organized social order across India. What helped them was that the Bhakti resurgence had begun as early as the 8th century in south India, hence its acceptance was considered legitimate by a majority. In Sankardeva's case, people were segregated into ethnic, and religious beliefs in the Ahom Kingdom although there was a legitimate political order in place. His idea therefore was to bring a social ethos to the Ahom kingdom which had a different social mix than the almost homogenised India of the time.

When he returned from his productive and enriching travel, he forsook religion altogether. Instead, he decided to use the creative aspects of culture like music, dance, gadya, bhaona to enable people to connect to each other on a common platform. Here was a man with hardly any material resources who single handedly connected the masses and gave them a uniformity which stood the test of time for centuries.

In contrast, we have so much resources to dispense on culture but not much of an idea on how to go about it.

I would particularly like to have the youth of the country, more so the region, to understand that there is a lot of cultural food out there for you to choose from. One must be discreet about one's choices. Just because you have a buffet, does not mean you are required to consume it all. You must exercise wisdom to choose according to your preference, clime, habit, and suitability. You must be rational and critical thinkers. If you are not, chances are that you will be caught in the commercial net laid in the cultural pool for you to succumb.

A general analogy, I hope, will serve you well. Across the glitzy malls that have sprung across India, most company establishments offer what is known as the "Buy-2-Get-2 Free" policy. You end up buying more than you need to while the company ends up selling what it intends to dispose of appealing to your 'necessity'. You act in haste and repent at leisure if that is, at all, available to you. You must know there is no 'Free Lunch' in this world.

You must therefore know what to 'consume' in this sale of cultural items around you.

(The author is a 12-time national award-winning filmmaker, and a recipient of Padma Bhushan.)

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