

Does the Constitution have ample provisions for devolution of powers?



Comments 0



Syed Miraz Ahmed 21 August 2013 9690 views

Assam Governor Janaki Ballav Patnaik in his inaugural speech at a two-day seminar titled: '**Autonomy and Devolution of Powers: Can it fulfill people's aspirations in Northeast India,**' organized by the Centre for Development and Peace Studies here said that the tribal communities in Assam and those in the rest of Northeast India must be empowered with the means to determine their own destinies, livelihoods, security dignity and self respect as equal citizens of our country so that they can be equal participants in the process of social and economic development.

He said that the Indian Constitution aims at a fully integrated nation, but is flexible and has ample provisions for devolution of powers. He was of the opinion that there can be real autonomy only if people at the village level are empowered and become part of the development planning process. "I am in favor of further decentralization of powers in the Autonomous Councils and this can be achieved with the introduction of the Panchayati Raj as prevalent in the rest of the country."

While calling upon the community leaders ruling the Autonomous Councils to provide good governance, the Governor said the challenge before those who run the Councils is to provide equitable justice to all the people living within the jurisdiction of the Councils including the minority and communities.

Delivering the keynote address at the seminar attended by academics, political and student leaders and prominent members of the civil society, former Director, Intelligence Bureau of India and a member of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), P.C. Halder said that the recent developments in the region have infused vigor in various statehood demands. “The demands for new states, articulated by protagonists, run parallel to voicing concerns by others who fear marginalization,” said Halder. With an appeal to all to discard violence, he argued that regardless of origin, violence retards economic growth and the pace of development. “Demand, debate and dissent on political issues are essential features of Democracy. The preferred process in a democracy has to be on dialogue and developing consensus amongst all the stakeholders,” he added.

According to Halder, there is no reason why the Autonomy and Devolution should not be successful in the context of the Northeastern region. “Empowering the self governance institutions at the ground level can do wonders. Effective village level devolution might prove beneficial in stabilizing and calming the situation through wider participation. I see a distinct need for harnessing capabilities of the civil society to sustain effective village level devolution,” he said. A sincere implementation of intended and already granted devolution of powers will pave the way for a community nurturing hopes for 'equality of opportunity' rather than the feeling of being discriminated against. He was of the opinion that even if a new state is created, the challenge of coping with diversity in a diverse society will remain and require an appropriate degree of devolution of powers for self governance at the grassroots level.

Speaking on the occasion, Paul Lyngdoh, Working President of the United Democratic Party, Meghalaya, said that the criteria for creation of autonomous states should be economic viability and availability of resources. He said the government must fix a minimum size and population before considering demands for small states. “There should be adequate safeguards for all ethnic, religious and linguistic groups in any small state”, he said. Mr. Lyngdoh, a former president of the Khasi Student’s Union, suggested setting up of a permanent States’ Reorganisation Commission with a clear mandate to examine the various demands which will function independently, objectively and judiciously. Today we have a situation that Northeast India has only 25 MPs in the Lok Sabha. While acceding to various aspirations of the people the stress should be more on development and not on ethnicity, more on development, decentralization, governance and not religion, class or language which can be used to whip up sentiments instead of new states. In the context of the Northeast, it is impossible that the various aspirations can be met by granting statehood. In order to strengthen this country and its federal structure, we have to take a fresh look at the representation we have in the Parliament, and we can do that only by having a balanced representation of all states in the Parliament. This is only possible when the number of states in India are increased to at least 50. In fact that is the number of states of the United States of America and India is at least three times the size of the population of the United States. It is only then that we can work out a equitable representation of all the states in a new environment.

AASU advisor Dr. Samujjal Bhattacharya while elaborating the autonomy discourse said that no group or community should go out of Assam and the State should not be divided although ‘full powers’ should be vested on the existing autonomous councils, including fiscal powers.

Addressing the seminar Dr. Bhattacharya said: “Autonomy must be an instrument of change, but the Government has kept the idea confined to a piece of paper without vesting real powers to the Councils.” He said the Government should not consider the autonomy demand and the agitations pressing such demands as a law and order problem and should try to resolve it through political dialogue. “At the same time the autonomy seekers must address the fears and apprehensions of the other communities living in their area”, Dr Bhattacharya added.

While on the other hand Dr. Ranoj Pegu, Advisor of the Takam Mising Porin Kebang, expressed fears of plains tribal groups in Assam being marginalised, Dr. Noni Gopal Mahanta, Associate Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Gauhati University, said the “ethnicization of space” has posed a challenge to co-existence and pluralism in Assam.

Presenting her paper during the seminar Patricia Mukhim, Editor of The Shillong Times and Member of the National Security Advisory Board, said that people need to have a platform to speak about themselves and that is the true meaning of governance which means true participation of the people. But now we are beneficiaries instead of being the stakeholders in governance. States need to be created to take development closer to the people and power should flow from the states to Centre. Also, we need to question whether statehood is the ultimate goal. There is a need to look beyond that, she said.

Chief Executive Member of the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council, Debojit Thousen gave a brief history of the autonomy movement in the northeastern region. He said that Article 244A of the Constitution need to be implemented, otherwise, the hopes and aspirations of the people will not be met. Thousen said that no amount of decentralisation will solve the problem till the route of fund flow from the Centre goes directly to the Autonomous Council.

Presenting his views on the Bodoland perspective of coexistence in a small state, former MP, Mr. U.G. Brahma called for a permanent institutional mechanism for dealing with smaller state creation demands. He also talked about nation-building and said that one cannot talk about regional integrity without talking about national integrity. He said that only a full-fledged state can satisfy the aspirations of the people.

In his talk on the model of autonomy in Northeast India, former MP Dr. Jayanta Rongpi, said that it has without doubt turned out to be a failed experiment. He stated that it is because there was a deliberate attempt to dilute the provisions of the Sixth Schedule since its inception. He demanded the implementation of Article 244A of the Constitution and said there cannot be a military solution to the grievances of the people and nobody should take advantage of the social faultlines existing in the region.

About autonomy and devolution of powers, Shashadhar Choudhury, former 'Foreign Secretary' of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), said that there is a need to come out of the 'Beggars Autonomy' and there is a strong need for a community-based system like a special economic zone. Highlighting the ideal arrangement of autonomy of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), Dr. Khakchang Debbarma, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, North Eastern Hill University called for the reservation of all the 30 seats for the tribals within the TTAADC. He supported financial autonomy of the council to bring in the control of land and forest resources under the jurisdiction of the tribal councils.

The seminar saw the participation of a cross section of civil society leaders, academicians, media persons and students from premier city colleges and universities.

Syed Miraz Ahmed

Writes, edits and researches. In 2013 he was conferred the Rotary International District 3240 Young Achiever Award for his work in the area of environment and digital journalism. In 2006 he was awarded first in the category of Wildlife Photography by the Department of Environment & Forests and Tourism, Government of Assam.

BY SYED MIRAZ AHMED

Boost for Assam youth entrepreneurship

Karbi outfit expresses ire over TV report

US team in search of NE war martyr

Karbi outfit calls for total shutdown

WWF-India, Capgemini, launches One Planet Academy in Guwahati

ON THIS DAY

Hagrama tsunami in BTAD, UPPL, BJP at a loss

Golok Samman 2023 Announced: Four Young Honourees Recognized

Lokdarshan: A Vibrant Folk Dance Extravaganza in Udalguri

Manas National Park Reopens for Visitors, World Tourism Day Celebration Planned

Webinar held: women entrepreneurship and women empowerment

RELATED

ABSU burns copies of 'Hamkoshar Parishista' over Bodo script issue

Tension persists in Bihubar after former paramilitary personnel's killing

A heartfelt tribute to poet Anis Uz Zaman

Tension grips Bihubar after youth social worker's killing

New Delhi BRICS Summit: Hoping for a Permanent Indian Presence in the UNSC
