

Bandh Culture vs Work Culture of Assam



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Bandh is a form of protest used by political activists or aggrieved organizations in South Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. It is similar to a General Strike. During a bandh, a political party or a community declares a general strike, for example An Assam bandh is a call for a bandh across Assam and a bandh can also be called within a smaller area, say Moran bandh or a district, say Tinsukia bandh.

During the period of bandh, which can be 12 Hrs, 24 Hrs, 48 Hrs or few days long the student/community organisation or political party declaring a bandh expects the general public to stay at home, cease regular work and not attend office. Shopkeepers are expected to keep their shops closed, and private/public transport operators of buses and taxis are expected to stay off the road and not carry passengers. Even private vehicles are also barred from plying on the road. There have been instances when large number of people came out and defied curfew during Assam agitation and brought the administration to a standstill.

A bandh is a powerful means of civil disobedience, and because of its huge impact on the local community and economy, it is a much-feared tool of protest. The six yearlong Assam Agitation was so spontaneous and imposing that central government was forced to sign the Assam accord and for the first time in the history of India students from University hostel went straight into capital to from AGP government. The Navanirman Andolon of Gujarat during 1983-85 was also on similar footing.

Open Burglary, forced closures, arson attacks, stoning, and clashes between the bandh organizers and the police are common instances during the period of closure. This happened during recent Arunachal Bandh called by student organisations protesting against granting of permanent residency to Chakmas, Motoks, Morans etc. in Namsai area. The bandh turned so violent that the state government had to withdraw the legislation. I was present on day 1 of the agitation and was lucky to come out with CRPF security.

Genesis of a bandh: India is a pluralistic society. There are more than 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes in India, each related to a specific creed, ethnicity, faith, occupation. Obviously the aspirations and demands of so many conflicting groups are difficult to meet. To complicate the situation there are 22 major languages in India, written in 13 different scripts, with over 720 dialects. These groups are in constant fight for establishment of own rights and control over resources. During 70s language movements were rampant all across India.

Bandh is sometimes conditional, if a demand is not met the organization declares bandh. If after repetitive bandhs the demands are not met then aggravation takes places. It leads to fasts, fast unto death, clashes, firing, etc. Hardliners take the struggle to underground like ULFA, MNF, NSCN, TNV, Naxalites, Maoists. Many a times the movement is hijacked by radical elements and original leadership loses control. Therefore, it's important for the rulers to keep a track on the movement and address the issues on time. Saying goes, a stitch on time saves nine. But it is seen that our leaders are quite insensitive and don't respond until the breaking point.

What is the leverage: In a country of 130 (1.3 Billion) crore population smaller communities find it extremely difficult to make the government listen to their demands. For example, the population of Assam is only 2.5% of Indian population, negligible from Centre's point of view.

Obviously larger communities having numbers and hegemony will force governments to abide their demands. Smaller communities like Assamese or 6 communities have no other option to press for their demands, other than resorting to agitation, strike, bandh etc. Some don't have adequate representation as MLA/MP or other value such as vote bank, therefore their voice will be ignored most likely. Bandh is a way to protesting and seeking redressal. A recent pointer is the region wide protest against the CAB (Citizenship Amendment Bill), few protesters staged a naked demonstration before the Parliament, bringing worldwide attention and embarrassing the centre. The agitation snowballed and brought down the government on feet. Ultimately the Bill could not be passed in the Rajya Sabha.

What is the cost: The bandh culture has become very popular in Assam. It seems to have been imported from Bengal. Sometimes a mere announcement in the media heralds a bandh, it is the easiest form of protest to launch. Since Assam and other states have arterial roads or rail lines, it's very easy to disrupt transport and movement of vehicles/trains. During Assam agitation OIL pipelines were blocked costing huge loss to the central exchequer. A whole gamut of organizations are bent on perpetuating bandh culture in Assam. For some people it has become a business. But fact is that during an Assam bandh the State loses Rs 60 to 70 crore every day according to a reply by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Chandra Mohan Patowary in the Assam Legislative recently. A total of 17 such bandhs hit the State last year causing a loss of Rs 1,02,9/- crore to the State GDP. Bharat bandh called in 2010 on the matter of fuel hike cost the country's GDP almost Rs. 13,000 crore, as per ASSOCHAM estimate. Again a nationwide bandh called in 2012 to protest against FDI in multi-brand retail and hike in petrol prices cost the country approximately Rs 12,500 crores, estimated ASSOCHAM and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). This has been the loss in terms of disruptions in production and trade.

Another nationwide bandh called by trade unions in 2015 hit banking and industry very badly. These bandhs also harm the country's image as an investment destination. The financial impact of the disruption of essential services might lead to an estimated loss of over Rs 25,000 crore to the economy, thereby taking into account the numerous direct and indirect losses. The financial loss to the nation due to bandh not only impact manufacturing industry, trade, transport, but banking services also get hit badly. The estimated loss of Bharat bandh in 2016 was Rs. 16,000-18,000 crore. Trade, transport and hotels form a major part of the country's GDP. The other major component to the GDP and GVA is the entire package of financial services including banking. Both these key segments are crippled by bandh.

Banning the bandhs:The Kerala High Court had banned bandh, calling it unconstitutional. The Supreme Court too had agreed with the high court's ruling. In accordance with what the Supreme Court said, the Assam government is taking steps to crack down on the bandh culture. The apex court's observation has been communicated to all district SPs. According to the information revealed in the Assembly, there were 18 local bandhs, 42 district bandhs, four BTAD bandhs.

The State government had taken the matter seriously when a PIL was filed at the Gauhati High Court against bandh. The government had told the Gauhati High Court that an Act would be put in place to curb bandhs. A drafting committee headed by Justice (retd) KN Saikia was formed for the purpose. The draft of the bill was given to the Gauhati High Court. But the court wanted some modifications, and asked for a re-examination of the bill. For this purpose, the state government formed a task force in 2016, and it came up with the Assam Prohibition & Prevention of Bandh Bill, 2017. This is under consideration now.

Assam has become the bandh capital of India. This image has affected flow of investment, tourists, trade. In fact, many tourists just touch Assam and then move to other states like Meghalaya, Arunachal. Bandh culture also gave rise to professional agitators, whose job is to blackmail business houses or bargain with political big-wigs. It has does affected the work culture of Assam. Where can you find someone who will say proudly that "I am a student leader", that too long past his student days.

Work culture of Assam: Work culture is the personality of a community. It defines the environment in which people work. It includes a variety of elements, including work environment, ethnic culture, value, ethics, practices, livelihood options, expectations, and goals. It has also some bearing on the climatic conditions. Agrarian societies have a casual work culture without much expectations and a casual approach to life. A jump from Agriculture to job culture has created disruption because of faulty education and aspirations. All the eligible youth has left the state for jobs elsewhere. Those stayed back are also aspiring to go out.

Creating a conducive work culture: A positive work culture affords people respect while expecting quality work every day. A positive environment often enthuses entrepreneurship and development. Sindhis, Parsees, Jews are examples of communities who became great nationalities because of positive and disciplined work culture despite being displaced and having miniscule populations. It's through sheer determination and rigid work culture that these communities have progressed and found place of respect in the comity of nations.

Assamese people were mostly agriculturalists. Production was mostly for consumption, not for commerce. It was self-sufficient because of conscious living and circular economy. However, post-independence as the country progressed, there was a rapid change in the ethos and culture due to education and aspiration. Now with digitization and globalisation the youth have moved away from agriculture and aspires for service, that too white collar jobs. The education system was faulty with lack of skilling and vocationalisation.

Edward A Gait. Commissioner of Assam in his book 'A History of Assam' named this place as "Sleepy hollow of the Brahmaputra valley' in 1905. He observed that 'this place is so humid and endowed that people living here are bound to be lazy. They will always be overrun by aggressive people from the West and the Hills, and same fate awaits them after 2/3 generations'.

That's why I think the work culture will be difficult to create here with so many festivals, rituals, puja, bihu, Shraddha, logun diyoni, nuwatuloni biya, bandhs, music festivals, cultural functions, golden jubilees, alumni meets, picnics, Sahitya sabha, Sangha meets, Student Union Annual Sessions etc etc. and basic needs are met by Rs. 3/kg rice, MNREGA job guarantee, Food Security, PMAY, Ujjala, Swacchh Bharat etc.

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