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Immigration, Language, Underdevelopment and Identity Crisis: A Reflective Analysis from the Perspective of Assam

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I

Being trapped in the transitional phases of a decolonized economy, the Northeastern region of India and particularly Assam remained at the periphery of capitalist development; the crisis was profound in polity and socio-cultural life as well. The developmental fruits of an emerging economy have been poorly distributed, thus creating a sense and feeling of alienation amidst people of this peripheral region of the country. The region has always been at the receiving end of the modernization process taking place in the entire country. Moreover, much of the regional economic underdevelopment has hitherto been believed to be caused by the intrusion of the outsiders and the control of the state's economy by the migrant and non-indigenous business communities. Such a cultural and economic hiatus has percolated down to different 'ethnies' and is now profound between the tribal peoples and the people of the plains. Unless, the modernization and the developmental fruits are evenly distributed, the identity 'crises' will be a continued affair.

Colonial processes and socio-economic conditions have always created identity crisis by deepening divisive roots and dimensions in a diverse society. The legacies of a colonial economy were naturally adorned by the newly independent but centralized Indian state. It aggravated the already existing cultural and economic hiatus between different communities of different regions in the same country. Being trapped in the transitional phases of a decolonized economy, the Northeastern region and particularly Assam remained at the periphery of capitalist development; the crisis was profound in polity and socio-cultural life as well. The developmental fruits of an emerging economy have been poorly distributed, thus creating a sense and feeling of alienation amidst people of the peripheral region of the country. The region has always been at the receiving end of the modernization process taking place in the entire country. Moreover, much of the regional economic underdevelopment has hitherto been believed to be caused by the intrusion of the outsiders and the control of the state's economy by the migrant and non-indigenous business communities. Particularly in Assam, such a cultural and economic hiatus has percolated down to different 'ethnies' and is now profound between the tribal peoples and the people of the plains. The objective of this paper is to find out the specific roots and causes of immigration and underdevelopment which may provide panacea to the long standing ethnic identity crisis and movements in the state. The paper is based on the primary sources such as government documents, Pamphlets, Leaflets, Documents published by the Central and State governments, Proceedings of the Assembly and the Parliament; as well as secondary sources such as Newspapers and Periodicals, and relevant articles and books.

II

Assam is considered as the gateway to the Northeast India and connected to the mainland India by a narrow corridor in West Bengal called the “Chicken’s Neck”. It is located south of the eastern Himalayas. Present Assam comprises the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak river valleys along with the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills with an area of 78,438 sq. km. It is connected to six other Northeastern states and has a long border with Bangladesh and Bhutan. In many respects, Assam is a miniature India with different national, ethnic, religious and linguistic and tribal groups living together in the region for centuries. It was never a monolingual or single nationality region at any point of time. A considerable number of people speaking Assamese, Bengali and other languages and dialects live in Assam. Hill tribes like the Karbis and Dimashas live in the hilly districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills with their own dialects and cultures and many plain tribes like Bodos, Mishings, Deuris, Tiwas, Sonowal Kacharis, Mech Cacharis, Rabhas, Koch Rajbanshis, etc. live in plain areas. There is also a mixed tea garden population with their own language and dialect. The process of assimilation of diverse ethnic groups of Assam became weak under the British rule. It led to clashes of interest among them and they continue to live and think along ethnic lines. The ethnic identity consciousness by various ethnic groups is further energized by the complex history of immigration into Assam.

The continuous flow of immigration into Assam started ever since the British occupation. The economic transformation of Assam during British colonial period caused an enormous demographic shift. The demand for labour in the tea plantations was the first major reason to turn to immigrants. In the absence of a strong local labour force, Assam had to face mass-migration of labour, mostly from the Jharkhand region, to serve the interests of the British capital. Tea labourers’ massive migration transformed the demographic structure very significantly in Assam. By 1921 the population of tea-labour has become 1.3 million or one-sixth of total population of Assam (Gait 1994 : 362). Other enterprises that developed during Assam’s economic transformation in the nineteenth century such as coal and oil fields and the construction of roads, buildings and railways, also attracted immigrant labour. There were, in addition, immigrants who came to Assam to occupy the new middle-class positions that required new skills, such as the knowledge of English, and to take advantage of the expanding opportunities for trading (Gohain & Bora 2007 : 10). The situation became more critical when the virgin and fertile soil of Assam has attracted a large number of immigrants from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in early parts of the 20th century. The immigrants gradually subjugated the vacant *chars* and forest lands of Assam. So rapid and large was the immigration that C.S. Mullan, a British Census Commissioner, commented in his Census Report of 1931 that immigration was “likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than the Burmese invaders of 1820 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization.”(*Census Report, 1931, Vol. III, Part I: 49*) The influx of Muslim peasants, which peaked during the first three decades of the 20th century, came to a halt with independence. The Assamese people also expected that the immigration would come to an end with the partition of Bengali dominated areas from Assam with independence. But contrary to their expectation, the Bengali Hindu ‘refugees’ from East Pakistan found no difficulty in crossing the porous border and settled down either by

themselves or through their relatives unchecked and undetected to escape communal violence. Of about twenty lakh refugees who entered India during 1947-1950, undivided Assam had to give shelter to some three lakhs (Misra 2000: 111). This flow of refugees was also seen during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 in which more than 12 million refugees poured into India, of which one million stayed back in Assam (Franda 1982: 109). The nationalist organizations of Assam like AASU fear that even today the immigrants from Bangladesh continued unabated to Assam through the porous borders (AASU 1980) and these dimensions of immigrants still continued to be a factor in Assam politics. Added to this, the annexation of the whole Northeast India to British India facilitated structural change in material conditions in Assam. Penetration of foreign capital, growth of tea plantations, development of railways and roadways, introduction of English education, emergence of private property in land and common subjection to a highly centralized political authority, brought drastic changes in its socio-economic structure (Srikanth 2000: 4119). As a result, internal differences and conflicts among the tribes and between the Assamese and other native ethnic groups remained unresolved.

Historically Assamese language developed as a result of interaction among different tribal groups in Assam. It was during the Ahom rule that Assamese became the lingua franca of the Brahmaputra valley. But during the British rule, the colonial rulers imposed Bengali as the official language of Assam. Projecting it as a deliberate attempt on the part of all the Bengalis to dominate the Assamese people, the Assamese middle class leadership mobilised the Assamese people and demanded that Assamese should be made the official language of the region. Simultaneously efforts were also made to develop Assamese language and literature. With this objective in view, they intended to adopt certain measures to establish their language in its rightful place. The *Asom Jatiya Mahasabha* led by Ambikagiri Roychoudhury submitted a memorandum to Assam Government in September 1947 appealing it to defend Assamese interests. The *Asom Sahitya Sabha* also campaigned for recognition of Assamese as the State language and language of education in 1950 and celebrated July 16 as “State Language Day.” (Datta 1993: 19) The *Asom Sahitya Sabha* gave an ultimatum to government to declare Assamese as the State’s language in 1959. These developments were described by H. K. Barpujari in the following way:

A chauvinistic section of the Assamese went further and sought to hasten the process of ‘Assamisation’ or extension of Assamese influence in the neighbouring hills. They could make no distinction between integration and assimilation and here lies the tragedy – the fragmentation of Assam. Constant harping of assimilation and ‘Greater Assam’ alarmed the unsophisticated hillmen of losing their culture, language and even their main prop namely land. The Khasis and the Garos who fought jointly with the Assamese leadership against the Cabinet Mission Plan of grouping, gradually developed a lurking fear of being exploited and outnumbered by their neighbours in the plains (Barpujari 1998: 16).

Amid intense controversy, the Government of Assam finally introduced the State Official Language Bill of 1960 in the Assembly. The introduction of Assamese as the State Language of Assam had reinforced the demand for separate political identity in the hills and

in due course Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were formed reducing the size of Assam. In 1972 again riots occurred over the decision of Gauhati and Dibrugarh University to switch to Assamese as the language of undergraduate education. Again the decision of the AGP government to impose Assamese language as compulsory third language upon the non-Assamese medium students in secondary schools, through a Circular given by the Secondary Education Board of Assam on February 28, 1986 was resented by All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and later the government suspended the same. This language policy bred a feeling of insecurity among the tribal and non-tribal ethnic organizations within a greater Assam. It added to the ever increasing unhappiness among the emerging tribal middle class in the hills and the plains which had existed vis-à-vis the dominant leadership of the plains since the colonial rule. The sense of deprivation and exploitation of the hills and plains tribals by the dominant leadership of the plains reached its zenith with the introduction of Language Bill. The hill elite complained that "The Assamese who happened to be the single majority community in a heterogeneous State try not only to dominate others in all affairs of administration of the State, but also try to impose their language on the non-Assamese" which was regarded by them as "imperialist policy of the Assamese over the non-Assamese" (Phukon 2003: 100). This turmoil on language ended with a compromise initiated by Congress leader Lal Bahadur Shastri. But, the 'fear of domination of the Assamese over the tribals' never subsided. It was reflected in the memorandum submitted by the Mikir and North Cachar Hills Leaders' Conference to the Prime Minister of India in June, 1973. In the minds of the plains tribals too 'the fear of domination of the Assamese' continued. The ABSU raised the issue through a booklet titled *Why Separate State* submitted to the President, Prime Minister and Home Minister on November 10, 1987, in which it maintained:

The arguments of the Assamese people and Assam Government are like that, the Assamese language is the official as well as regional language of Assam, a link language among different communities of Assam, a language for the integrity of Assam and that is why everyone must read Assamese, must speak Assamese, must know Assamese, those who live in Assam must speak Assamese and those who do not speak Assamese they are not Assamese or indigenous people of Assam, Assam is only for Assamese – they think (ABSU 1987).

Thus, the tribal elite of the hills and the plains and the non-tribals too alleged that "the Assamese people always try to impose Assamese language upon the non-Assamese people including the indigenous tribal people." As such here arises the clash between the Assamese speaking people on the one hand and tribals and other linguistic minorities on the other. It is argued that the colonial Assam had to be reorganized due to the aggressive cultural policies pursued by Assam's mainstream leadership. Udayon Misra observed that the rigid stand of establishing the Assamese as the sole Official Language of the State had contributed significantly to the desire of Assam's "tribal" populations to opt for separation (Misra 1988: 122).

III

In addition to this, in independent India, the capitalist path of development has generated severe regional disparities. Financially Assam depends heavily on the Centre, a

result of centripetal constitution, to discharge its responsibilities. Assam failed to evoke any systematic response from the Centre for a long period. It has been argued that Assam is an endowed region, gifted with many natural resources, but the endowments have not translated into economic growth and development. Again Assam is located in a strategically sensitive region which faces perennial floods, political disturbances and severely underdeveloped infrastructure of roads, railways, communication, power, terminal and institutional facilities and abject poverty (Hussain 1993: 67). Hence, Assam fails to draw worthwhile private investment for its economic development. Terming Assam as “colonial hinterland” Tilottama Misra stated that “there has been a systematic exploitation of the rich resources of Assam, before 1947 by the colonial rulers, and since then by the Indian State and Indian capitalists who have continued the colonial tradition”(Misra 1980: 1357-1365). Thus, Assam continues to remain an agriculturally and industrially backward State in spite of having rich resources. It led to the growing awareness among the Assamese people of being subjected to gross economic exploitation on a scale comparable to, and even sometimes worse than in the pre-independence days (Phukon 1984: 114-115).

The policy of strengthening the Centre at the cost of the States has led to the opinion that “Assam is being subjected to colonial or ‘quasi-colonial’ exploitation by foreign imperialists and by the Indian State and the big industrialists” and “has been progressively sucked dry of its natural resources”(Misra 1980). Despite being the country’s largest producer of tea, oil, plywood and forest products, Assam is one of the poorest and industrially most backward States of India. Its economy remained predominantly agrarian. Assam is affected by increased pressure on available land due to demographic transformation. In addition to this, Assam faces perennial floods. The failure to control the Brahmaputra and other rivers contributed decisively in keeping Assam agriculturally backward in spite of its fertile soil. The growth in agricultural sector in Assam was virtually stagnant leading to dependence on other States for food grains.

The development in industrial sector is also not encouraging. Tea has been the biggest ‘extractive enterprise’ of Assam founded in the colonial period. The total area under tea cultivation in Assam is accounting for more than half of the country’s total area under tea. The tea production in Assam constitutes more than 50 percent of the total production of the country. But Assam is deprived of her legitimate share and benefits because of the practice of concealment of real profit of tea earned by the foreign as well as big Indian capitalists (Borgohain 2012: 45-46). Moreover, except the Assam Tea Corporation which is a public sector organization owning a few sick and unprofitable tea gardens, the overwhelming majority of the big gardens are under foreign and Indian companies which are controlled from London and Calcutta. As a result, a large share of profits from the Assam gardens flow out to foreign and Indian big companies. In this regard Amalendu Guha asserted that ‘the stranglehold of foreign capital on the economy of Assam remained very much there’ (Guha 1977: 329).

Another important natural resource of Assam is crude oil which has become a cause of contention between Centre and Assam in post-independence period. The oil industry did not develop in Assam contrary to the expectations of the people of Assam for two basic reasons: first, the foreign capital played an important role in oil industry till the beginning of

the Assam movement; second, the Government of India was not interested in establishing refineries in Assam until the vigorous movements started by the people of Assam. Apart from the question of the establishment of refineries, the people of Assam have been feeling that the State is not getting adequate royalty for crude oil. There could have been no other reason except vested political interests for the establishment of the large public sector refinery for Assam crude at Barauni with more than 30 lakh tonnes, it is argued. Mass movements protesting against this unfair decision of the Centre were staged in Assam in 1956-57, as a result of which the Centre tried to appease the people by establishing a small refinery at Gauhati with an annual refining capacity of only about 7 lakh tonnes. Another refinery movement shook the State in 1969, demanding the setting up of a second public sector refinery. But even this time the new refinery-cum-petrochemical complex fell far short of the size and capacity of the Barauni refinery, its refining capacity being only about 10 lakh tonnes a year. Further, Assam has been deprived of her due share of royalty on the crude produces. This trend of deprivation continued till today and this was reflected again in a memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister on April 20, 2012 by the Government of Assam.

In addition, there was much possibility of establishment of petro-chemical and some other ancillary industries on the basis of natural gases extracted from the oil fields in Assam. But, the growing importance of natural gas as a source of energy and as raw material for a variety of modern industries does not seem to impress the Central Government much. Therefore, the Centre as well as the State Government has not adopted any clear policy in this regard. For, over 50 million cubic feet of natural gas is being flared off daily at the different oilfields of Assam for several decades. According to an estimate during the period of 1970-1987 an amount of natural gas worth Rs. 1900 crores was burnt up in Assam (Gohain & Bora 2007: 46). Only about a very little amount of natural gas is utilized in Assam and most of it is being used in the Namrup thermal plant. Of late, as a result of Assam Accord the Assam Gas Cracker Project registered as 'Brahmaputra Cracker and Polymer Limited' on January 8, 2007 is coming up at Lepetkatta in Dibrugarh which has start commissioning from the year 2015.

Further the colonial pattern of industrialization is evident among the plywood and other forest based industries of Assam. Assam earns very little compared to the sales tax earned by the Government of India from Assam's plywood. Eighty per cent of the produces of the plywood factories of Assam has been transferred by roads and rails to depots outside Assam. On the other hand, most of the plywood industries of Assam are owned by big Indian capitalists. Only a few plywood factories of the State produce tea-chests for the tea garden of Assam and they produce only 50 percent of the total requirement of these gardens. Besides, Assam has some other major Central public sector industries like Bramhaputra Valley Fertilizer Corporation Limited (BVFCL), Cement Corporation of India Limited (CCI), Hindustan Paper Corporation Ltd. (HPC), North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Limited (NEEPCO) etc. BVFCL Plant of Namrup produces around 45 per cent of the total output of its parent organization Hindustan Fertiliser Corporation. The production of the Namrup plant is expected to increase further with the commissioning of new plant. The Namrup unit is the largest in Hindustan Fertiliser Corporation. Yet, the headquarters of the HFC is set up in

Calcutta, notwithstanding the repeated requests of the Assam Government to locate it within Assam. Similarly, the headquarters of the HPC have been set up in Calcutta in utter disregard of the legitimate claims of Assam. Again, Assam, in spite of being the third largest jute producing State in India, has not been able to draw sustenance from development and diversification of jute products.

In the field of power generation too, the position of Assam has been low in the all-India list. Although Assam, as a State crisscrossed by fast mountain streams and rivers, has a large potential of hydel power in Assam, there have been very few hydroelectric generating plants in Assam at present. Of course, some new hydro electric projects are coming up in the Northeast India like Lower Subansiri Hydroelectric Power Project (2000MW), Dibang Hydroelectric Power Project (3000 MW) etc. However, these projects have experienced several problems during construction due to landslides, re-design and opposition. In addition to this, Assam has a tremendous potential in tourism that has not been exploited at all. It has diverse ethnicity, varied climatic conditions, national parks like Kaziranga and Manas, rain forests, beautiful hilly landscape, tea gardens and rivers like the Brahmaputra and Barak and its tributaries. Assam has each and everything from topographical diversity to scenic beauty and from rich historical background to unique ethnic life-style. In spite of its identification as a tourist destination it lacks the infrastructure and the marketing drive to attract tourists. (Bhaumik 2009: 240).

Another cause for the slow pace of economic development of the State has been the inadequate transport facilities. Even after decades of independence Assam has been far behind in railway network. The British constructed the existing metre-gauge railway line in Assam in 1881 to facilitate the transportation of tea and troop movements whenever necessary. So, Assam's single main railway line passes through the tea-belts of the State without touching most of the important towns and villages. The railway map of Assam has remained the same since the British days, and the motives which impelled the British to construct the railway in this region appear to be shared by the administrators from Delhi.

Thus, Assam remained backward in spite of enormous wealth due to post-colonial capitalist nature of economy of India. The legacy of colonial economy has continued in post-colonial Assam and it continues as 'colonial hinterland'. It appears that in post colonial period the nature of Assam politics manifests a neo-colonial trend generated by the new group of elites which emerged in independent India. As a result of India's weak federal structure and capitalist path of development, Assam financially depends heavily on the Centre to discharge its responsibilities for which, many times, it suffers from the "step-motherly attitude" of the Centre. The sense of frustration of the people of Assam further aggravated as a result of worsening of the unemployment situation in the State and the upsurge of allegations of discrimination against local youth in recruitment for Central Government undertakings located in the state. Therefore, the people of Assam participated in large scale in several movements viz. oil refinery movement, Assam movement etc., against the centre in the post-colonial period.

IV

Owing to the combination of above factors such as the geographical location of the state, neglect of the central government, unabated migration, incompetence of state

leadership, and unwillingness of the Indian monopolies to set up industries in Northeast, Assam remained a backward state with growing competition for limited social and economic space among the diverse communities. As alternative sources of income were very limited, the demand for cultivable lands and government jobs started mounting up. They have been experiencing frustration, dissatisfaction, tension, competition, conflict and violence in varying degrees in the different socio-economic and regional milieu. Such a situation is conducive for the emergence of various kinds of social movements through which the masses try to seek alternatives, betterment and satisfaction (Hussain 1993: 7-8). It led to a state-wide agitation by All Assam Students' Union in 1974 on the issue of the economic development of the state. The increasing pressure on land and jobs ultimately found expression in the anti-foreigner upsurge 1979-85. While the problem of continued influx and the ever-growing pressure on land coupled with the fear of the Assamese losing their socio-political identity seemed to be the immediate motivating factors of the movement, it was in actuality a popular outburst against decades of economic neglect of the state by the central government (Misra 2000: 122-23). By attributing a high rate of growth of population in Assam due to foreign immigration and by creating a bogey of the Assamese people becoming a minority in their own land, the leaders of the Assam agitation were able to mobilise lakhs of people in the Brahmaputra valley in support of their demands (AASU, AAGSP 1980). While a moderate section of the leadership demanded detection and deportation of all foreigners settled in Assam, the radicals who later formed the militant outfit, ULFA, tried to direct the movement against the Indian state. The Assam agitation continued for about five years and came to an end with the Assam Accord in 1985. Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), a political party floated by the leaders of Assam agitation, came to power in the subsequent elections in 1986. But within a few years, the Assamese found their hopes shattered. The AGP government could not solve any of the basic problems of the people of Assam.

From the time the Assam government attempted to impose the Assamese language, the Bengali citizens in the Barak valley started looking at every move of the people in Brahmaputra valley with suspicion and caution. With the Bangladeshi immigrant issue gradually turning communal, several communal organisations seeking to fight for the cause of the Muslims made their appearance in recent years. More than these, in the aftermath of Assam agitation different ethnic groups, like the Ahoms, the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Koch Rajbanshis, etc, who at one time supported the Assamese cause against the Bengalis, have now begun using similar slogans, against the Assamese people. The Bodos began claiming that they were the indigenous people of the land and demanded a separate Bodoland state for protecting Bodo identity, language and culture from extinction (Dutta 1993; Choudhury 1995; Srikanth 2000). With the demand for an autonomous state picking up in North Cachar and Karbi Anglong Hills, the plain tribes like Rabhas, Mishings and Koch Rajbanshis became conscious of their own identities (Hussain 1994; Bhuyan 1989; Srikanth 2000). Far from ensuring the unity of tribes, the growth of ethnic identities has aggravated intra ethnic fears and prejudices.

Again the issues relating to political and financial autonomy and centre's continued neglect of Assam have turned a section into sympathizers of militancy. Unabated immigration from across the border, the ever-increasing pressure on land, the changing demographic pattern and the moribund state of economic progress of the state have been

contributing towards sustaining insurgent politics in the region(Srikanth 2000). The birth of ULFA showed the way for other ethnic groups to float their own militant outfits to realise their demands. Today in addition to ULFA, many other militant organisations like NDFB, Karbi National Volunteers (KNV), Dima Haram Daoga (DHD), United Peoples' Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), Koch Rajbanshi Protection Force, Rabha National Security Force, Muslim United Liberation Tigers Association (MULTA), etc. are active in Assam. Apart from these Assam-based militant outfits, a few other militant groups active in the bordering states also have their bases in Assam.

V

The tenuous inter ethnic relations coupled with a historical legacy of moribund state of economy beholds enough explanation as to why the post colonial period saw growing competition for limited social and economic space with resultant hostilities and prejudices among different ethnic groups in Assam. Like other parts of the country, in Assam too educated Assamese middle class gave voice to the sub-nationalist aspirations of the people in the post-independent period. Obsessed with the fear of Bengali domination, the leaders over emphasised language and immigrant issues and did very little to win over the confidence of the tribal people and involve them in the nationalist movement. Because of this limitation, certain tribal groups could not fully identify themselves with the Assamese or with the Indian nationalist leadership. After independence the dominant Assamese leaders, who got hold over the state Congress and took over the reigns of government in Assam, tried hard to make Assam a monolingual state. Their efforts to extend Assamese hegemony over other national and ethnic groups living in the state through *Assamisation*, however, back-fired, leading to the strengthening of other linguistic and ethnic identities in the state(Srikanth 2000). The Congress governments, both at the centre and the state, did very little to develop the economy of the state. Owing to limited industrialisation, low level of urbanisation and weak transport and other basic infrastructure in the state, alternative avenues for employment for people are severely restricted. Under the circumstances, land becomes the main source of livelihood for the majority of people. As a result, there developed competition and conflicts amongst groups for control over limited resources and opportunities. The continuation of immigration in a situation of stagnation and underdevelopment generates competition and hostilities among different ethnic groups. In pursuit of its interests, every ethnic group form their own political parties or pressure groups for articulating their demands. Their efforts finally motivate and guides identity politics in Assam. In Assam, the much claimed struggle against exploitative Indian state or indifferent central government ends up as fratricidal conflicts with other communities living in the state. Until and unless the toiling masses of Assam identify the material roots of their insecurity and alienation and involve in common struggles for the elimination of poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment, it is not possible to ensure economic development and promote peace and harmony in the multi-ethnic and multi-national state of Assam. The need of the hour is to distribute the developmental fruits evenly among the people of this peripheral state of the country; otherwise, the identity 'crises' will be a continued affair.

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