

THE EMERGENCE OF HINDUTVA IN A REGION:
A CASE STUDY OF ASSAM

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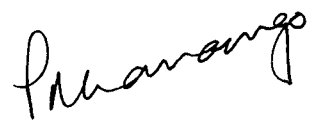
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For Ma and Baba

With all my Love....

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Malini Bhattacharjee.

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Abbreviations

ABPS	Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha
ABVKA	Akhil Bharatiya Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram
ABVP	Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad
AASU	All Assam Students Union
AGP	Assam Gana Parishad
AUDF	Assam United Democratic Front
BJS	Bharatiya Jana Sangh
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BMS	Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
IMDT	Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act
INC	Indian National Congress
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of Hindu nationalism in the past two decades has been spectacular. From a small coterie in the 1920s the ideology traveled through the years to gain a national platform in the 1990s, with the BJP occupying the seat of power in Delhi. The RSS formed in 1925, became the foundational organization for the formation of the *Sangh Parivar*¹, which represent Hindu nationalism in modern India. It is indeed phenomenal that an organization which started with only five persons in 1925, has spread its tentacles into every possible sphere of India's civil society, including the political.² They cover almost every field of intellectual and cultural activity- be it education, history, music or media, the Parivar has tried to promote its own institutional network.³

Hindutva's advancement from periphery to the centre of Indian politics explains its remarkable adaptability to the changing socio- political landscape of India. The organisation now has its presence in almost every possible region in the country. This appears interesting in the context of Parivar's rigid adherence to the idea of building a corporate and unified '*Hindu Rashtra*', as envisaged by Savarkar, Hedgewar and Golwalkar. As in any form of ethnic nationalism, Hindu nationalism, in its formative phase at least, looked at the society as an organic, harmonious whole.⁴ K.B. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS claimed India as a Hindu Rashtra. Golwalkar also clearly spelt out: "We are one country, one society, and one nation...; and hence, it is natural that the affairs of the nation are governed through a single state of the unitary type."⁵ Deendayal Upadhyaya, also, favours an 'integrated Bharat' which is based on his idea of 'national soul' (*chiti*) that has to be 'awakened' to its destiny and its *virat* ('life force').⁶ The

¹ The 'family' of RSS affiliated organizations is known as the *Sangh Parivar*. For details on the Parivar, see Christophe Jaffrelot(ed.), *The Sangh Parivar: A Reader*(New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005)

² Pralay Kanungo, 'Introduction', *RSS's Tryst With Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), p. 13.

³ K.N. Panikkar (ed.), *The Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, (New Delhi: Viking, 1999), p. xxiv.

⁴ Christophe Jaffrelot, 'BJP and the Caste Barrier: Beyond the "Twice Born"', *The Sangh Parivar Between Sanskritization and Social Engineering*, in Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen, (ed.), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 22.

⁵ M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Bangalore: Jagarana Prakashana, 1980[1966]), p. 224.

⁶ Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 158.

Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), Hindutva's first political affiliate, in its first election manifesto in 1951 stated: "The whole of Bharatvarsha, from Himalayas to Kanyakumari, is and has been, through the ages, a living organic whole—geographically, culturally and historically."⁷

The BJS, soon after its formation in 1951, echoing Golwalkar's enunciation, adopted 'One country, One People, One Culture, One Nation and One ideal' as its Fundamentals. Its first election manifesto in 1951 stated: "The whole of Bharatvarsha, from Himalayas to Kanyakumari, is and has been, through the ages, a living organic whole—geographically, culturally and historically."⁸ Hindutva's uncompromising agenda of a unitary India also logically compelled it to search for an all-encompassing National Language in the post-independence period. As language constituted an integral part of Hindutva's concept of nationhood, it propagated rhetorics like 'Hindi, Hindu, Hindusthan'. In Hindutva's understanding, political unity could be maintained only by making Hindi as the sole *lingua franca*, not only between the centre and the states but between one state and another as well. Rigid adherence to the concept of an organic state however, has not stopped Hindutva from making a dent in regional politics.

CONTEXT: HINDUTVA IN REGIONS

In a country like India with innumerable diversities, the components of language, religion and culture often juxtapose themselves into interesting combinations in different regions. Realizing these dynamics the Sangh Parivar intelligently and strategically attempt to expand by embarking upon certain region specific agenda and mobilization. It would be useful to highlight how Hindutva enters into a region and its modus operandi, who constitutes its social base and alliance partner in the region, how does it construct the other, what kind of strategies does it adopt in consonance with the specificities of the region, what is its strength in different regions—organisational as well as political.

⁷ *Bharatiya Jana Sangh: Party Documents, Vol. I, Principles and Policies, Manifestos, Constitution* (New Delhi: BJS Publications, 1973), p. 48.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The Entry and Modus Operandi

The core of the RSS organization constitutes of the Sangathan ideology, the creation of a numerically small but devoted and efficient organization of patriotic men who could provide for a progressive organization of the entire Hindu community.⁹ Various methods, techniques, rituals and forms of mobilization have been adopted over the years in an effort to capture the Hindu masses. This expansion has been made possible by the endeavours of several affiliates of the RSS like the Sewa Bharati, Vidya Bharati, Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, Shikshan Mandal, Sanskar Bharati etc., which work in coordination, and sometimes even single-handedly, thus making ground for Hindutva. The affiliates all have highly centralized authority structure very similar to that of the RSS.¹⁰

Shakhas are the basic units where the RSS builds up its organizational base. Training in Shakhas has to be imparted by a core of trained officers called Pracharaks. Hedgewar trained the first batch of pracharaks and sent them to different parts of the country to open Shakhas and recruit swayamsevaks.¹¹ This tradition still continues. Thus, 'pracharaks', who are devoted workers of the RSS with high commitment and integrity to the organisation, are entrusted with the task of laying the foundation stone of the organisation in a new province by setting up shakhas, indoctrinating young minds as swayamsevaks and coordinating the Sangh's activities in the region. These Pracharaks establish and extend their sphere of influence through the local notables.¹² In most of the cases, the RSS built up its base around an existing Hindu community, which provided it with a congenial atmosphere for spreading its activities. However, a few exceptions are also seen.

⁹ Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) p. 98.

¹⁰ Walter Anderson and Sridhar D. Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron: The RSS and Hindu Revivalism* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1987) p. 4.

¹¹ Pralay Kanungo, 'The Navigators of Hindu Rashtra: RSS Pracharaks's' In Satish Saberwal and Mushirul Hasan (eds.), *Assertive Religious Identities : India and Europe* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2006). pp. 233-54.

¹² For Madhya Pradesh, see Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Politics in India*, and for Orissa, see Pralay Kanungo, 'Hindutva's Entry into a Hindu Province: Early Years of RSS in Orissa', *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 2, 2003, p. 3298.

In Maharashtra, the initial recruits as well as pracharaks were Brahmins, especially Chitpavan Brahmins. Prior to the assassination of Gandhi, the centres of vernacular Brahmin culture in the middle classes in provincial cities like Pune and Nagpur provided important centres for the RSS.¹³ The popularity of the RSS, as well as Hindu Mahasabha, in these provincial milieus were intimately related to loss of status and power of the Chitpavan and Deshashtha Brahmins in the social order.¹⁴

The genesis of Hindu nationalism in Punjab can be traced to the early twentieth century, where Swami Dayanand Saraswati's Arya Samaj played an important role in laying down the trajectory that was followed later by leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS etc. To a considerable degree, the RSS was formed in Punjab as a generational appendage of the Arya Samaj- Hindu Sabha movement already in existence in that province. The first RSS shakha was formed on the campus of the Arya- Samaj sponsored Dayanand Anglo Vedic College and was comprised of the sons of many Arya- Samaj leaders.¹⁵

In Madhya Pradesh,¹⁶ Hindutva started its operation in the 1940s in Ratlam, Chittor and Mandsaur districts through pracharaks like Kushabhau Thakre.¹⁷ Soon after its inception, the Jana Sangh unit in Madhya Pradesh established alliances with local notables and princes. For instance in 1966, it made a pact with the Rajmata of Gwalior , Vijaya Raje Scindia, who soon thereafter became an all- India figure of the party and then of the BJP.

¹³ Thomas Blom Hansen,, 'BJP and the Politics of Hindutva in Maharashtra', in Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen, (ed.), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, op. cit., pp. 122- 23.

¹⁴ Ashish Nandy, *At the Edge of Psychology*, (New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1980) , pp. 78-98.

¹⁵ Heeger, A.Gerald, 'Discipline versus Mobilization: Party Building and the Punjab Jana Sangh', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 10, October, 1972, pp.867-8.

¹⁶ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics 1925 to the 1990s: Strategies of Identity- Building, Implantation and Mobilization [with special reference to Central India]* (Delhi: Viking, Penguin India, 1996).

¹⁷ Christophe Jaffrelot, 'BJP and the Challenge of Factionalism in Madhya Pradesh' in Jaffrelot & Blom Hansen (ed.), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, op. cit., p.269.

Gujarat, often referred to as the laboratory of Hindutva, is one of the main strongholds of the Sangh Parivar. Hindutva made its first formal appearance here with the establishment of the state unit of Jana Sangh within six months of the birth of the party in 1951.¹⁸

In Orissa the RSS deputed Baburao Paldhikar, a Maharashtrian pracharak, who contacted notables like Nilkantha Das and Godabaris Misra, who were disgruntled Congressmen and came from upper caste Brahmin background, and gradually built up the Parivar. It was a difficult task as Orissa has only a small number of minorities.

The RSS activity in Kerala preceded Indian Independence with three Maharashtrian Pracharaks dispatched to work in Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Kozhikode, the main towns in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. The genesis of Hindu nationalism in Kerala can be traced to Hindu revival movements in the late nineteenth century which were aimed at strengthening Hinduism and also at emancipating the lower caste groups.¹⁹ However, Hindutva's entry in Kerala is indeed an interesting phenomena considering that nearly two fifths of its 30 million people are non Hindu. They are contained within the six districts of the erstwhile Malabar region and Kasargod, an area where Muslims form nearly 40 percent of the population. Moreover Kerala also features a powerful sense of regional (Malayali) identity, a Hindu population for whom caste identities have been politically significant for nearly a century, and a legacy of formidable leftist movement. In fact it would be correct to say that if Hindu nationalism could achieve a breakthrough in such an inhospitable setting as Kerala, it would demonstrate the potential to do so virtually anywhere in India.²⁰

¹⁸ Ghanshyam Shah, 'The BJP's Riddle in Gujarat: Caste, Factionalism and Hindutva', in Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen (eds.), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, op. cit.p.245.

¹⁹ K. Jayaprasad, *RSS and Hindu Nationalism. Inroads in a Leftist Stronghold*, (New Delhi: Deep &Deep, 1991), p. 123.

²⁰ James Chiriyankandath, 'Bounded Nationalism:Kerala and the Social and Regional Limits of Hindutva', in Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen (ed.) *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India* op. cit., pp. 203.

Social Base, Building Social Coalition:

Hindutva has traditionally been identified with the Brahmin- Bania, upper caste/ class social base. However, this elitist orientation, over the years, became a liability especially for the political offshoot of the Sangh Parivar which needed to broaden its base for winning elections. Especially since the 1990s after the 'Mandal affair', leaders of Hindutva devised 'social engineering' to expand its electoral support base.²¹ In U.P, because of the restricted social base it was unable to cross the threshold for a long time.²² Besides the objective to retain political power, its decision to support the Mayawati government in 1995, however, was to create its own Dalit constituency. The statistics of the BJP legislators in 1985, 1989 and 1991 U.P. Assembly reflect the Party's effort to accommodate the lower castes. The years 1985- 91, also saw the BJP's scheduled caste base expanded.

In Gujarat, too its support base had traditionally been the middle and upper caste, particularly the Brahmins, Banias (traders), Patidars (upwardly mobile land-owning) and Patels²³ . Here, Hindutva took full advantage of the disgruntlement of the upper castes at the success of the KHAM (Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims) coalition, as devised by Mrs Indira Gandhi. Also, while, until recently, an important axis of Gujarati politics revolved around the political competition between upper castes and Patidars, the BJP succeeded in more or less uniting them.²⁴ An important support base for Hindutva in Gujarat says Asghar Ali Engineer, is the large number of Gujarati émigrés, staying abroad, mostly in UK and USA. Today these emigres constitute a central bulwark of the NRI community who try to overcome their sense of rootlessness by being ultra Hindu

²¹ Christophe Jaffrelot, 'BJP and the Caste Barrier: Beyond the 'Twice Born', The Sangh Parivar Between Sanskritization and Social Engineering', in Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen, (ed.), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India* op. cit., p. 23.

²² Jasmine Zernini Brotel, 'The BJP in Uttar Pradesh: From Hindutva to Consensual Politics?' in Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen, (ed.), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India* op. cit., p.74.

²³ Praful Bidwai, 'Dalits and Adivasis: Cannon Fodder for Hindutva?', in www.himalmag.com, as viewed on 6th May 2007.

²⁴ Desai, Radhika, 'Blazing Gujarat: the Image of India's Future?' in www.indowindow.net/akhbar/article as viewed on 25th May, 2007.

contributing liberally to the VHP and providing many of the chief personnel to its overseas organizations.²⁵ While mobilizing Kshatriyas in Gujarat, and building the organization, the leaders invoked traditional symbols like sword, saffron colour flag and turban and revived rituals and festivals. The backward castes are seen as the real Kshatriyas, i.e. the warriors who protected the Hindu Samaj in the ancient period against all calamities, aggression and shocks.

In Rajasthan Hindutva has been trying to enlarge its social base by incorporating different castes. It's previous anti Jat plank has been diluted to a great extent; it even ensured them the OBC status under the pressure of post- Mandal politics. This has enabled to expand its social base in Rajasthan. In an attempt to woo the OBC community in Maharashtra, the state level BJP leadership decided to publicly support the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in the 1990s. To the BJP in Maharashtra, the specificity of the OBC- communities promised to be an instrument which could 'open' and differentiate the Bahujan Samaj category and thus make it available for Hindu nationalist intervention.

Hindutva has enforced its presence in several districts of coastal Karnataka, seeking to consolidate its base among diverse castes. Successive communal riots or conflicts in Coorg, Mysore, Belgaum, Hubli, Gokak, and two coastal districts – Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts have strengthened the bases of this new wave. Trying to break free from its 'upper caste' association, Hindutva politics in recent days is engaged in building a broader social coalition in this region by imbibing backward classes/castes, within its fold. It is interesting to note here that in creating a supra national identity of Hindutva, particular identities of each community were retained. Social groups like the mogaveeras, kulalas, devadigas too became a part of this social coalition.²⁶

In Kerala, historically, Hindu nationalists have always enjoyed greater strength in Malabar, with its concentration of Muslims and legacy of Hindu- Muslim tension, than in

²⁵ Ashgar Ali Engineer, 'Gujarat Riots in the Light of the History of Communal Violence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 14, 2002, pp. 5052-53.

²⁶ Assadi, Muzaffar, 'India: Karnataka: Hindutva Policies in a Coastal Region', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 08, 2002.

erstwhile Travancore- Cochin, with its complex mix of caste and class politics. The creation of the Hindu Munnani in 1984 was an attempt to make a breakthrough in the latter region. The BJP's strength was mainly among the non- Malayalis, who represented the majority of the Hindus in Kasaragod taluk, and local RSS shakhas were controlled by the Karnataka State committee. Interestingly in this area it was the festivals of Diwali, Dusshera and Ganesh Puja that were celebrated rather than Onam, the main festival of Malayali Hindus.

Construction of the 'Other':

The ideology and organization of the RSS was established with the attempt of awakening the Hindu consciousness, based on an ideological interpretation of culture. The RSS has been largely successful in shaping up the Hindutva ideology as is present today. It successfully integrates Hindu religious based culture with political power to create a polarized society based on the concept of the "other" and "social exclusionism".²⁷ Lying at the base of such an ideology is a mission to "cleanse" India from the non- Hindus, the "other" and create a Hindu Rashtra through unifying and revitalizing the Hindu community.

The "other" in most regions of the country is the Muslim. In fact the survival of Hindutva politics critically depends on the demon image of a uniformly fanatic, backward looking aggressive Muslim whose only aim seemed to be restricted to decimation of Hindus.²⁸ Thus the exclusionist ideology of Hindutva banked heavily on certain myths, alleged past wrongs by Muslims against the Hindus. It became the essential weapon, a means through which these past wrongs could be avenged and to create a new Hindu identity. This identity is constituted by a sense of injury, a sense of always having been on the losing side, a sense of victimhood.²⁹ The RSS is devoted to mobilizing the Hindu community in this manner to 'rectify' alleged past wrongs committed against Hindus by

²⁷ C.P. Bhambri, *Hindutva: A Challenge to Multicultural Democracy* (Delhi: Shipra, 2003), p.5.

²⁸ Harbans Mukhia, 'Communal Violence and the Transmutation of Identities', in Praful Bidwai, Achin Vanaik and Harbans Mukhia (ed.), *Religion, Religiosity and Communalism*, (New Delhi: Manohar 1996)p.35.

²⁹ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'Introduction' in *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: An Omnibus* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. xvi.

Muslims.³⁰ Activities to 'counter' the spread of Islam and Christianity are conducted at various levels by the VHP, the Bajrang Dal, the VKA and the many Hindu seers who preach from the platforms of these organizations.

Communal stereotyping began in Gujarat ever since the 1965 Indo- Pak war on the Kutch border. Since then, the fear psychosis and sense of injustice among the majority community has been fortified and surfaced time and again. The myth that Muslims were favoured by the state has been systematically articulated and spread in Gujarat. The Muslims have often been branded as anti- national, fundamentalist, conservative and backward.³¹ The anti- Muslim feelings which prevailed among the upper- caste Hindus- mainly the Rajputs, Brahmins and Banias were cultivated by the Jana Sangh and the RSS in the 1960s. In U.P. the cohesion of the community was based on a rejection of cultural pluralism and the exclusion of Muslims who formed an important part of Uttar Pradesh's social and cultural milieu for centuries.³² At the populist level, it unleashed crude anti- Muslim rhetoric to mobilize support on the streets, especially during the Ayodhya issue.

In certain regions, the Muslim community was portrayed as the direct cause of economic hardship of the Hindus. In Karnataka, for instance, the Moogaveeras or Karvis presence was seen in the fishing, canning, seafood sector, etc. The entry of other communities particularly Muslims into their economy was obviously seen and viewed in suspicion. This perfectly suited the interest of Hindutva to accommodate the community into their ideological framework. The most important category among the Muslims here are the Baerys. Baerys are largely pitted against the Hindutva forces in the coastal belt. They are found mainly in the stretch between Kasargod in Kerala and Byndoor in the northern parts of coastal Karnataka. In Maharashtra, however, it was difficult to argue that the Muslims were taking away all the jobs. Thus, here the RSS' strategy was to highlight a nebulous Muslim underworld who were anti- national forces, loyal to Pakistan posing

³⁰ Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998), p.17.

³¹ Ghanshyam Shah, 'Caste, Hindutva and Making of Mob Culture', in Siddharth Vardarajan (ed.) *Gujarat, Making of a Tragedy* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 416-417.

³² Zoya Hasan, , in Praful Bidwai, Harbans Mukhia & Achin Vanaik (ed.) *Religion, Religiosity and Communalism* , op. cit., p.261.

themselves as the major threat to development in the state. This demonization of anti-national Muslims is one of the definitional pillars in the constructions of the Shiv Sena's version of Hindutva. On the contrary, in the case of Orissa, as the Muslim population is very small in the state, Hindutva does not find here a tailor-made ground for its easy propagation. Therefore, the RSS asserts that its expansion in Orissa is not based on an anti-Muslim thrust. The Orissa unit claims to be more positive and constructive in its approach than its counterparts in other provinces where Muslims are found in substantial numbers.

The modus operandi of the RSS in the tribal areas is different, from the other parts, the main enemy here being the Christian missionaries. They believe that '*Vanvasis*' (forest dwellers) are very much a 'part of our wide cultural canopy'. The *vanvasis* are positioned as true bearers of the Hindu essence, who preserved and practised Hindu traditions in the forest. The VHP has devised a clever way to spread Hindutva among the tribal people. Its argument is that the greatest follower of the "Aryan warrior" Rama was Hanuman, who was tribal; hence, the Adivasis are the original worshippers of Rama and, by derivation, Hindus.

In tribal areas such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and especially Orissa, Sangh organisations such as the VKA, have been increasingly active in recent years, persuading tribals to eschew tribal religious practices in favour of Ram and Hanuman puja, and confronting Christianity aggressively. The organization of Hanuman and Shabri festivals in the Adivasi areas gives a very precise message of their place in the Hindu fold. Most of these act to give the cultural channels especially to Dalits and adivasis to co-opt them into Hindutva fold. In Gujarat, the epi-centre of the war against Christianity is the Dang district, with 92% tribal population, mainly Bhils and Warlis.³³ To facilitate the induction of tribal people into the Hindu fold, Hanuman statues and temples dedicated to Hanuman worship are being constructed across the State.

³³ Harsh Mander, 'Incursions of Hindutva', *Times of India*, January 7, 2005.

Madhya Pradesh also has a deep and powerful network of RSS shakhas, Bajrang Dal offices and Vanvasi Kalyan Ashrams, the latter mostly spread in the adivasi areas.³⁴ The RSS is particularly active in the Jhabua region which is a tribal belt. The activities of Christian missionaries here are vehemently opposed to by the swayamsevaks, on the pretext that they are engaged in converting the local adivasis to Christianity. In 1998, the rape of four nuns in Jhabua by local goons, elicited the following response from the then VHP Central Secretary, B.L. Sharma, "Rape of four nuns in Jhabua is only indicative of 'Hindu outrage' and the anger of patriotic Hindu youth against anti-national forces. The missionaries should pack up and leave...the VHP will not shut (our) eyes to the activities of these traitors."³⁵

The Adivasi communities like Bhil, Bhilala and Patiliya - form the bulk of Jhabuas's 14-lakh-strong population. The RSS draws them into its pan-Hindu worldview by pitching this as a capacious, welcoming faith. The RSS has done extensive work in the regions surrounding Dhar and Jhabua. They have initiated the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram and the Hindu Sangamas, thus creating a large network in the Adivasi areas. In order to co-opt the tribal people in the region, the Sangh uses a range of cultural connects ranging from religious solidarity and strong local pride to a keenly felt disenchantment with the administration.

In Orissa, with an Adivasi population of over seven million from more than 60 tribes and a Dalit population of over five million, the RSS has consciously created a base among these people. By forming various organisations, ostensibly for charitable and social causes, the Sangh Parivar has managed to extend its reach to almost every nook and cranny of rural Orissa. While organisations such as the Seva Dhanyantari Shasthya Prastisthan organise medical camps in the villages, Satsang Kendras conduct Hindu scripture reading programmes aimed at bringing about a "religious re-awakening" among the people.

³⁴ Puniyani, Ram, 'Madhya Pradesh: Lengthening Trident Shadows', in www.countercurrents.org, 17 September, 2005.

³⁵ V. Venkatesan, 'Communal Outrages in M.P.', *Frontline*, Vol.15, No.29, October 10-23, 1998.

Udaipur, in Rajasthan a predominantly tribal district, inhabited by the Garasias, the Gametis, the Bhils and the Meenas, is another territory gradually coming under the saffron spell. The objective of the RSS here includes, bringing back the tribal people into their fold, like in all other parts of the country. On February 29, 2004, for instance, in Bhagpura gram panchayat of Richaawar village in Jhadol block of Udaipur district, a ghar vapsi or homecoming ceremony was organized by the VHP, in which 650 Christian tribal people were brought back into the Hindu fold. They were sprinkled with Ganga water, given an 'Om' inscribed locket and calendars and made to take a pledge in the name of Maharana Pratap.³⁶

Wayanad district, with one of the largest tribal populations in Kerala, and which had been the scene of operation of a large number of Christian missionary groups and institutions obtaining funds from abroad, has for some years now also been a region of focused social and communal activity by the RSS cadres. The RSS had been offering competitive health care and education facilities for Adivasi families in an effort to counter the activities of Christian missionary groups.

In the tribal districts of Northeastern Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya again, the activities of the RSS are carried out mainly by the VKA and the Vivekanda Kendras. The main focus here is on preventing the tribals from being converted into Christianity. The Vivekananda Kendra is particularly active in Arunachal Pradesh, where it is slowly enticing the indigenous faiths within the fold of Hinduism.

Mobilization Strategies in Regions:

The expansion of the Sangh Parivar is achieved by undertaking a variety of mobilization techniques. Because what it is to be a Hindu varies from region to region, local idioms are the vehicle through which notions of the good and the right is promoted by the Hindu nationalist movement. By adopting local specificities and cultural and religious symbolism of different regions, the RSS has made inroads into not only the 'Hindi belt', but has also managed a breakthrough in several 'inhospitable' regions like Karnataka,

³⁶ T.K. Rajalakshmi, 'Hindutva at Work', *The Hindu*, Vol.21, Issue 6, March 13- 26, 2004.

Kerala, Assam, through the alliance route in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and other states.

The use of symbols with religious resemblance is an effective way of mobilization. One has been the popularization of Vinayaka idols and Ganapati festival in Southern states like Maharashtra and Karnataka. In Maharashtra, the narrative of Shivaji, 'the great warrior' is also employed to elaborate the greatness of the Hindu valour. Hindu nationalism, for the Shiv- Sena must be a militant nationalism, represented by Shivaji, as opposed to Gandhian non violence and supposed appeasement of Muslims. This highly masculinist rhetoric no doubt pulled young men towards Hindutva.

In Orissa, the RSS considers the Jagannath – Oriya – Hindu- Indian interconnection an ideal framework for the spread of Hindutva. Hence it depicts the culture of Orissa as Jagannath Sanskruti because this overarching culture surpasses and dominates all other sects and little traditions. The RSS characterizes Jagannath as a 'vanavasi' (tribal) deity and Orissa as a vanavasi province; the Oriyas it believes possess as Vanavasi character, still retaining the primitive innocence, simplicity and honesty of a popular character ('lok charitra') of Orissa receptive to its ideology³⁷

Issues like the Meenakshipuram conversion ceremony and the Thali Temple agitation have been employed in the southern states to mobilize the Hindus. In Karnataka, instead of the usual 'Ganesha festival' or 'temple bhajans', 'Hindu Mahasabhas', or 'Hindu Samajosava' were convened. It is through these 'samajosavas' that Hindutva made its presence felt. Different backward castes or classes were invited to participate; including the heads of their respective mutts. Every year this has been the programme, systematically done to indoctrinate the ideology of Hindutva. This has helped in the social coalition of dominant caste ('bunts'), backward castes/class ('billavas, kulalas, devadiagas', etc), and the upper caste ('konkanis, brahmins', etc). An important base for

³⁷ Pralay Kanungo, 'Hindutva's entry into a 'Hindu Province': Early Years of RSS in Orissa', *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 2, 2003, p. 3296.

the dissemination of Hindutva ideals in Karnataka is the '*mutt*'.³⁸ The Pejavar and the Adamar mutts in particular, have become standard bearers of the Hindutva cause. With the emergence of the mutts as the rallying points for Hindutva in this region, most religious functions have been saffronised.

In Rajasthan, the attributes of martial acumen and valour associated with Rajput warriors, much glorified in the Rajasthani community conforms closely to the sort of assertive nationalism that the Sangh Parivar is attempting to project as a homogenized form of Hinduism. In the construction of this narrative, Rajasthan is cast as the preserver of the true faith, of the assertive self –confident, martial tradition of Hinduism.³⁹ In northern and central Indian states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, the RSS makes good use of popular Hindu culture and the popularity of gods like Ram and Hanuman for mobilization. Tools like Ram Katha, pravachan and jagaran, are used as common features in the indoctrination of Hindutva here in cities, towns and even tribal areas.

The party's Ayodhya campaign especially L.K. Advani's *rath yatra* received great fervour in UP's villages and towns. Further the opening of the Babri Masjid and the shilanyas ceremony that took place during this period added to its popularity. In 1989 the Sangh Parivar organized the Ramshila Pujan a campaign aiming at collecting and consecrating foundation bricks for the future temple in Ayodhya. Religious sentiments were fanned by recitals of bhajans, slogans, legends, myths, movies and rituals. Bricks for Ram mandir were collected from villages as a token for solidarity. The saffron flags, the repetitive use of the Hindu mantra Om and all visual iconography were drawn from religious sources. Together they promoted the claim that the movement to liberate Ram's supposed birth-place spoke for all Hindus, for Hinduism itself.⁴⁰ Inflammatory pamphlets

³⁸ S. Viswanathan, R. Krishnakumar, Parvathi Menon, 'The spread of Hindutva in the South', *Frontline*, March 30, 2004.(Vol and Page)

³⁹ Rob Jenkins, 'Rajput Hindutva, Caste Politics, Regional Identity and Hindu Nationalism in Contemporary Rajasthan, in Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen (ed.), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, op. cit., pp. 104- 05.

⁴⁰ Richard H. Davis, 'The Iconography of Ram's Chariot', in David Ludden (ed.), *Making India Hindu: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.51.

and provocative slogans raised during VHP marches and Virat Hindu Sammelans were instrumental in unleashing greater violence.

In Mumbai Shiv Sena welcomed the Rath Yatra and held a large public meeting with Thackeray and Advani. It became extremely popular even in Maharashtra where worship of Ram never was as popular and widespread as in Northern India. Apart from this, the BJP started a *Upa-* yatra in Maharashtra, a local yatra which would join the larger Ekta yatra moving under the leadership of the BJP president Murli Manohar Joshi from Kanyakumari in the south towards Srinagar in Kashmir. The yatra was launched at the so-called 'Holy Pass' where a famous warrior of the Shivaji period was killed, and ended in Aurangabad (or Sambhajinagar in the parlance of the Shiv Sena and the BJP) six days later. Carrying saffron-coloured urns with holy water and soil gathered along the route, playing patriotic film-songs, the yatra typically marked a ritualistic and religious display of events by the Hindutva activists.⁴¹

In the 1990s BJP's increasing identification with the VHP-led Ram Janambhoomi campaign centred on Ayodhya had its impact in Kerala too. In October 1990, as BJP national President L.K. Advani's rath yatra wound its way to Ayodhya, state party president K. Raman Pillai conducted his own *Jan Shakti* procession through Kerala. *Ram Jyothi* processions were also held and several thousand kar sevaks from Kerala traveled to Ayodhya. Fourteen months later Advani's successor as BJP President, Murli Manohar Joshi, began the second stage of his Ekta Yatra, national unity march across India to Kashmir, from the Sri Padmanabhaswami Temple in Thiruvananthapuram. The passions generated by such events contributed to a marked increase in clashes provoked by communal issues. Between October 1990 and December 1992 thirty people died in six such outbreaks compared to just five in the previous three decades.

In Madhya Pradesh, the Bhojshala issue, evoked communal sentiments much like the Ramjambhoomi did in Uttar Pradesh, thus providing enough fodder to the Hindutva activists. Unaware of historical acts, the BJP and the HJM have been carrying on a

⁴¹ *Times of India*, 31 December 1991.

campaign since 1992 when the Babri Masjid was demolished in Ayodhya, demanding the closure of the Kamal Maula mosque, a ban on Friday namaz there and the installation of an image of Saraswati in the Bhojshala complex.⁴²

In certain places, Trishul Diksha has been devised by the VHP as a mechanism to use religious cultural symbols for political mobilization of Hindutva. In Rajasthan, for instance, in April 2003, with an eye on the state elections due in November, the VHP had planned a state-wide *trishul* (trident) distribution programme. In an inflammatory speech, the international general secretary of the VHP said, “raise your trishuls and pledge that you will worship Bhagwan Shankar and Ma Durga, that you will build the Ram temple, that you will destroy Pakistan and make India a Hindu Rashtra”.⁴³ The VHP and the Bajrang Dal had launched a similar ceremony and a *jalabhishek* programme in the Sawai Bhoj temple at Asind in Bhilwara district.⁴⁴ Mobilization is also carried out through the aid of electronic and print media. The recent release of a communal VCD by the BJP in U.P., just before the Assembly elections in 2007, spewed venom against the Muslims, created much uproar and succeeded in drawing considerable attention towards the party.⁴⁵

Hindutva’s Political Alliances Across Regions:

In the political field, Hindutva has always been a prime opponent of the Indian National Congress. 1967 became a turning point in Indian politics when Congress lost its monopoly in many states and a coalition of opposition parties formed the SVD governments. Though this experiment was short lived, it enabled the RSS-BJS to share political power in several states: Ram Prakash Gupta, Baldev Prakash, V. K. Saklecha, became Deputy Chief Ministers in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Madhya Pradesh

⁴² Naunidhi Kaur, ‘Building Hatred around Bhojshala’, *Frontline*, Vol. 20, Issue- 09, April 26- May 09, 2003.

⁴³ T.K. Rajalakshmi, ‘Stopping Togadia’, *Frontline*, Vol. 20, Issue 09, April 26- May 09, 2003.

⁴⁴ *Frontline*, October 26, 2001. (Page ?)

⁴⁵ *The Hindu*, Saturday, Apr 07, 2007, <http://www.hindu.com/2007/04/07/stories/2007040722201600.htm>. Visited on July 5, 2007.

respectively; Vijay Kumar Malhotra became the Chief Executive in Delhi Metropolitan Council, and L.K. Advani the Chairman (Speaker); Anshu Gupta was elected Mayor of Delhi Municipal Corporation; Vijay Kumar Mitra, Ramdeo Mahto and Rudra Pratap Sarangi became Ministers in Bihar.

In the post Emergency period, Hindutva made an alliance with Jay Prakash Narayan and the BJS merged itself in the Janata Party. 1977 Elections gave an opportunity to Hindutva to share power at the Centre as a component of Janata Party and also, to have its Chief Ministers in states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi and it was a part of state governments in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Gujarat, Orissa, Haryana and Maharashtra. Thus Hindutva consolidated its regional support base and expanded to new regions beyond the traditional base of support in the 'Cow Belt'.

Regionalization of Indian politics became a permanent feature since 1996 when regional parties and few independent candidates captured 171 seats in the eleventh Lok Sabha elections. The failure of the BJP to garner support from regional parties to win a confidence vote and formation of the United Front Ministry called for an introspection. Still the BJP was not prepared to come to terms with this new political reality; the 1998 Election Manifesto echoed the old Jana Sangh commitment to "one nation, one people and one culture." However, the BJP quickly did course correction by shrewdly forging an alliance with regional parties to control New Delhi in 1998. Besides ensuring power at the Centre, this alliance provided Hindutva a great opportunity to transcend geographical barriers in spreading its social and political tentacles into the vast tracts of the nation.⁴⁶ In Maharashtra, it found a natural ally in Shiv Sena, which gave the BJP access to popular audiences and constituencies it never could have accessed on its own. In Punjab its alliance with the Akali Dal (Badal), [AD (B)], helped the BJP to establish its national project of hegemonic control that would promote Hindutva in place of the Congress- I's

⁴⁶ Pralay Kanungo, 'Hindutva and Federalism in India: Inherent Tensions and Strategic Alliance', in *Indian Journal of Federal Studies*, Issue No. XIV, July 2006.

'pseudo- secularism'.⁴⁷ Further, AD (B)'s base in the Sikh peasantry perfectly complemented the BJP's urban support base among the Hindus.⁴⁸

Post 13th Lok-Sabha election, the BJP made a serious attempt to go for pre-electoral alliance with as many parties as possible irrespective of the image of the parties or their leaders. In its search for allies, the BJP not only compromised with its self attained image of being a "party with difference" with no inhibition in shaking hands with leaders facing corruption charges like Sukh Ram and Ms. Jayalalitha, but also had to put its core agenda of Ayodhya, Article 370 and Uniform Civil Code to the back burner. It became clear to the BJP leaders that until and unless the BJP managed some significant accretions from the peripheral States, the chances of its coming to power at centre were remote. For the 13th Lok-Sabha election in 1999, the BJP was left with no option but to manage pre-poll alliance with the DMK in Tamil-Nadu and TDP in Andhra Pradesh. This strategy paid dividends as the tally in these two states could substantially compensate its loss in Uttar Pradesh and the BJP was able to form a coalition government at the centre.

The intrusion in Tamil Nadu is particularly interesting, considering the fact that "Tamil cultural nationalism" was so deeply entrenched in the minds of the local people that this slogan had become a part of the political culture of the State. Against this deep rooted "Tamil cultural nationalism", there was hardly any attraction for the "Hindu Nationalism" or "Cultural Nationalism" of the BJP in this State. In 1998 Parliamentary-poll however, the BJP succeeded in managing its electoral alliance with AIADMK and made its first entry in the Lok-Sabha. In 1999 midterm Lok-Sabha Poll, the BJP managed an electoral alliance with AIADMK's rival, the DMK and succeeded in increasing its strength in the Lok-Sabha to four. Improved parliamentary poll performance of the BJP in Andhra Pradesh also, from four seats in 1998 to seven in 1999 could be partly attributed to its tactical poll alliance with Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the ruling regional party in the state and partly to the consolidation of anti-Congress votes in its favour.

⁴⁷ Singh, Gurharpal, 'The Akalis and the BJP in Punjab: From Ayodhya to the 1997 Legislative Assembly Election' in Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen, (ed.), *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, op. cit. p.242.

In the present context, Madhya Pradesh has been having a BJP Government off and on, while Rajasthan has consistently remained the BJP's stronghold. Also, unlike in Maharashtra, Punjab, Haryana, or Bihar, the BJP in Rajasthan does not have to rely on a regional party as an ally. In the words of Rob Jenkins "the Rajasthan BJP itself functions like a regional party".⁴⁹ As of 2005, the BJP rules the Indian States of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, and the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa through its National Democratic Alliance partners. In January 2006, it also gained power in Karnataka state, when the ruling Janata Dal (Secular) governing majority fractured, with one faction aligning with the BJP to form a coalition government. In Orissa, again it formed the government in alliance with the Biju Janata Dal.

In the Northeastern states of India, where Hindutva, has also made its presence by consistently working through an array of affiliates and also building up alliance with different regional political forces. The BJP has also made inroads into Arunachal Pradesh through an alliance with Gegong Apang. In Nagaland, the BJP cohabited with the NSCN backed Naga People's Front during the NDA regime. In Assam, it became part of the Assam agitation against illegal immigration from Bangladesh and allied with the AGP in 2001. However, it later walked out of the alliance. Hindutva's experiment in Assam would provide clarity on how Hindutva operates in a specific regional context.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research are the following:

To understand how a rigid extreme nationalist ideology like Hindutva operates in a region where Indian nationalism is fiercely contested;

To analyze the historical, social, political and religious dynamics of Assam and find out how does Hindutva attempt to channelise some of these to its advantage;

⁴⁹ Rob Jenkins, 'Rajput Hindutva, Caste Politics, Regional Identity and Hindu Nationalism in Contemporary Rajasthan', *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, (ed.), Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen, op. cit op. cit., p. 103.

To explore how does Hindutva conflate its coherent ideology with disparate regional socio- cultural dynamics of Assam;

To find out how the politics of Hindutva gets consolidated by the perceived threat of Muslim immigration;

To understand Hindutva's modus operandi and strategies of penetration;

To throw light on the objectives, organization and programmes of the RSS and its affiliates;

To analyze the operation and electoral performance of the BJP in the political milieu of Assam which is dominated by the Congress on the one hand, and regional parties like the AGP on the other;

And finally, to explain the impact of the emergence of the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF), a party primarily representing the Muslims, on Hindutva politics in Assam.

HYPOTHESIS

Hindutva, despite being an extreme nationalist ideology, adopts different strategies in different regions, showing greater adaptability and selectively appropriating different regional traditions for its growth and expansion. Hindutva has emerged in Assam by conveniently conflating its core ideological issues with the social, cultural, religious and political dynamics of the state, and thereby getting greater legitimacy.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for conducting the research has been based on both primary and secondary literature available on the study. However, the secondary literature not being adequate, a field study of was undertaken to Assam. The fieldwork included collection of primary data like pamphlets, records of various RSS affiliated organisations and the conducting of interviews with several RSS pracharaks and office bearers, to get a better perspective on the issue. Among the primary sources used, the *Organiser*, a weekly publication by the RSS provided the organisation's perspective, essential for this research. Newspaper articles, both national and regional have been used to get details about the political problems and issues in Assam.

CHAPTERISATION

The first chapter contextualizes Hindutva in the historical, social, cultural and religious traditions of Assam and seeks to understand how the RSS selectively appropriated some of the major characteristics inherent in these traditions, facilitating its entry into this region.

The Second chapter focuses on the Sangh Parivar's evolution and trajectories of expansion in Assam, examining the organization, ideology, strategies, and programmes of the RSS and some of its prominent affiliates like the ABVP, Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, Vidya Bharati and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which are actively engaged in the region.

The third chapter demonstrates how Hindutva carries forward its agenda through its political affiliate—the BJP. Analyzing the BJP's political agenda, strategies, alliance building, and electoral performance, it tries to explain how the politics of the party revolve around Hindutva.

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CHAPTER: 1

CONTEXTUALIZING HINDUTVA IN RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL, TRADITIONS OF ASSAM

Geographically and racially, the region we now call Northeast India is situated between the two Traditions of the Indic Asia and the Mongoloid Asia.¹ This geographical-cultural condition of "in-between-ness" is an important factor for the crisis of identity. A major cause of the ethno political movements of Northeast India today is traced to these identity crises. Hindutva realizes this and intelligently makes use of the opportunity to construct an identity for the Assamese, the mission being to define a connection between Assam and 'Bharat', since the ancient times.

Since our view of human history often colors the perception of who we are in a fundamental way, the RSS therefore uses history as a tool to further its agenda. Indian history from the perspective of the Hindutva ideology reintroduces ideas that have long been discarded and are of little relevance to an understanding of the past. The re-writing of history according to these ideas is not to illumine the past but to allow an easier legitimation from the past for the political requirements of the present. The Hindutva obsession with identity therefore is not related to the early history of India, but arises out of an attempt to manipulate identities in contemporary politics.² The history of Assam, like all other histories of Indian states, is replete with examples of Hinduisation and Sanskritisation and even has Vedic and epical references to it. The RSS selectively uses these references to build up the argument of a strong Hindu identity in Assam. The way in which information is put together, and generalizations drawn from this, do not always stand the test of analyses as used in the contemporary study of history.

¹ Lalsangkima Pachuau, "'Tribal' Identity And Ethnic Conflicts In North-East India: A Christian Response", in http://www.manipuronline.com/North-East/December2005/tribalidentity24_1.htm, as viewed on 10th July, 2006.

² Romila Thapar, 'Hindutva and history- Why do Hindutva Ideologues keep Flogging a Dead Horse?', *Frontline*, October 13, 2000.

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly introduce the state of Assam and examine how Hindutva has selectively appropriated its religious, cultural and social traditions to make inroads into this region. It discusses the prevalent religious and social history of Assam and tries to look into the genesis of Hinduism in the state. It also briefly highlights the problem of Muslim immigration in Assam, starting from the colonial period, which has been the most important issue for the RSS in the state.

Ancient Assam:

In ancient times, Assam was known as Pragjyotishpur (and/ Kamrupa). The Australoids are believed to be the earliest settlers of this region and they were known as *Nishada*. This group was followed by the Mongoloids who belonged to the Kirata group. It is believed that they came to Northeast from different directions and at different intervals of time. According to Sir Edward Gait, the earliest known settlers in the Brahmaputra valley are the Kacharis of mongoloid race, speaking a Tibeto Burman language-group.³ The Mongoloid racial stock is mainly concentrated in the hilly region of Northeast and it is sub- divided into two types: Palaeo Mongoloids and Tibeto Mongoloids. Adi, Nyishi, Mishing, Mismi, Khamti, a variety of Naga tribes, Bodos, Garos etc., are the members of the Mongoloids. After the Mongoloids came the Caucasoids. The non tribal Hindus and Muslims of Assam are of Caucasoid origin. Thus N. N. Bhattacharya points out, that the indigenous population of Northeast consisted basically of four ethno-linguistic groups: Austro- Asiatic, Tibeto- Burman, Siamese- Chinese and Indo Aryan.⁴

With little regard to history, the RSS draws attention to both the Ramayana and Mahabharata which make distinct references to Pragjyotisha and Kamrupa- the ancient and medieval names of Assam, thus providing them with a congenial basis to argue their case. Here, Hindutva brings home the idea that Pragjyotisha, i.e., Assam was essentially a Hindu province and was well connected to the rest of 'Hindusthan'. Drawing on

³ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta & Simla: Thacker Spink & Co., 1926 [reprint 1994]) p. 236.

⁴ N.N. Bhattacharya, 'Ethnic Cultural Diversity of North- East India', in Bimal J. Deb (ed.) *Ethnic Issues, Secularism and Conflict Resolution on North East India*(New Delhi: Concept, 2006), pp.27-28.

mythology, it traces the link thereon to Rukmini, the wife of Lord Krishna, a princess who supposedly hailed from present day Arunachal Pradesh.

“We come across the name Pragjyotisha, for the first time in the Ramayana (Kiskindhya k. ch. 42) Yuddha (k.69) and with Naraka in the first reference. Sugriva directs Susena, his father-in-law, to search for Sita with Ravana in the place of Naraka in Pragjyotisha, situated in the deep sea...”⁵

The Vana- parva (ch. 142) of the Mahabharata gives a description of the bones of Naraka, who was killed by Vishnu with his hand by miraculous power. In the Sabha- parva (chapter 51), Bhagadatta is described as the king of Pragjyotisha. In the Udyoga- parva (ch.48), Pragjyotisha is described as a city of Asuras. The same parva, (chapter 130) narrates that when Krishna invaded Pragjyotisha, Naraka fought against him and was killed. Krishna plundered Naraka’s treasury and took away all the gems and goods and also one hundred damsels to Dwarka.⁶

Emphasis is also laid on the famous Naraka legend, which bears great significance in celebrating the cause of ‘Aryanisation’ of this region. It is believed that Naraka was born of Mother Earth (Basumati) and Vishnu in the form of a bear incarnation. Pleased with the entreaties of Basumati, Vishnu took his son to Pragjyotisha, the capital of Kamrupa and the country of which Goddess Kamakhya was the presiding deity. Naraka fought with its existing inhabitants, the ‘Kiratas of brown complexion and shaven heads’, slew their king Ghataka and drove the vanquished Kiratas to the region of goddess Dikkaravasini. Vishnu then installed Naraka on the throne of Pragjyotisha and asked his son to live always on the hillock Nilakuta and not to worship any other God or Goddess other than Kamakhya: (Kalika Purana 38/144). In obedience to the advice of Vishnu, Naraka became the devotee of Kamakhya. He was not only the initiator of Saktism, but also did much to spread the Aryan culture.⁷

⁵ Dr. Biswanarayan Shastri, ‘Pragjyotisa Kamrupa and Naraka Myth’, in *Pragjyotisapur Through Ages* (Guwahati: Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Samiti, 1996), p. 19

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷ Dr. Daloi Sarma, H.N., ‘Religious Faiths Prevalent in Pragjyotisa Through the Ages: Saktism’, in *Pragjyotisapur Through Ages*, (Guwahati: Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Samiti, 1996), p. 34.

It must be noted here that the projection of these myths and legends, has a significant impact on the mindset of the Assamese people. The cult of Kamakhya is extremely popular in Assam even today and Vedic references such as the above, instill a sense of strong Hindu identity amongst the people. Moreover, the prevalence of diverse Hindu traditions from the ancient period in Assam provides a tailor made ground for the RSS to claim the antiquity of Hindu religion in this region. Hinduism in Assam represents a confluence of diverse cults and sects such as Saivism, Vaishnavism, Tantrism and Saktism.

Hindu Traditions in Ancient Assam:

Saivism

The earliest Hindu sect that prevailed in ancient Kamrupa in addition to the tribal faith was Saivism. Archaeological evidences show that the Saiva cult became well developed in the early centuries of the Christian era. The worship of Siva in his different manifestations both in his phallic and iconographic representations has a great antiquity in Assam.⁸ The rulers of Kamrupa, down to Dharmapala, patronized Saivism and regarded Siva as their tutelary deity. The pre eminence of Siva worship is also indicated by the Prasastis found in many of the copper plates of the period. Besides, the kings in these records described themselves as Parama Varaha and Parama Mahesvara, which clearly illustrate that they were unquestionably great champions of Siva. That Saivism was a fully developed religion with various sub- cults can be seen from the various names by which Siva is invoked in the Prasastis. He is invoked as Paramesvara (the supreme lord), Mahesvara (the great lord), Isvara (the lord), Mahavaraha (the great Boar), Adideva (the first God): all these names denote Siva's position of supremacy over all other gods.⁹ The archaeological remains of the 8th century A.D. discovered at Narakasura hill, the stone image of Nataraja Siva and the terra-cotta linga discovered at Ambari also bear

⁸ R. Hofstader, 'The History and Social Sciences', in Fritz Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 359.

⁹ The tribals worship Siva in different names according to their rituals. The Bodo Kacharis worshipped a God called Batho. Saivism which was the dominant religion of the ruling dynasties bears certain affinities with the Bodo tribal deity "Sivraj- Bathau".

great significance in testifying to the religious zeal of the people of ancient Kamrupa.¹⁰ A large number of pre- Ahom Saiva temples and religious places prove the popularity of Siva worship in ancient Kamrupa. Thus from the time of the legendary king Naraka up to the present century, Saivism has been prevailing in Assam as a living religious cult.

Among different Bodo tribes, Siva is revered as Bathau, Bathau-brai or Bathau-siv-rai, with much dancing, feasting and sacrifices. The Bodo- Kacharis believe that Sivrai protects men from diseases, keeps away wild animals from their fields, and helps one to win battles. In fact there were various tribal modes of worship of Siva, which continue to exist even now.¹¹

Vaishnavism:

The Vaishnavas do not believe in idol worshipping and perform Namkirtana where the glory of Lord Vishnu is recited. From all archaeological sources it is evident that Vaishnavism had its way to Kamrupa probably during the last part of the third century or the first part of the fourth century of the Christian era. This is evident from the establishment of the Bhagavata Balabhadra temple by King Surendra Verma. The earliest recorded reference to the worship of Vishnu in Kamrupa, occurs in the Badaganaga Rock inscription (554 A.D.)¹²

Besides these major sects, several sculptural representations of other Puranic gods and goddesses have also been discovered in the province, like that of Ganesa, Kartikeya, Indra, Agni, Kuvera Surya etc. This provides Hindutva further opportunity to establish its claim about Assam's Hindu identity. That the Surya cult was once popular in Assam, it claims, is also evident from the very name Pragjyotisha. It shows that the cult existed at least from the 8th to the end of the 12th centuries. The cult of Ganapati and Manasa, is

¹⁰ Anima Choudhury, 'Saivism in Assam', *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, (Shillong: NEIHA, 1999) p.125.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 121.

¹² B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam* (New Delhi: Horizon, 1986), p. 169.

also assumed to have prevailed in Assam, as a good number of images of the same have come to light in Assam.¹³

Saktism

Saktism, says Eliot, “in the sense of a definite sect with scriptures of its own, if not confined to the north- east corner, at least has its headquarters there”.¹⁴ Indeed, throughout the medieval period, even down to the 18th century, the leading religion of Assam, seems to have been Saktism. Goddess Kamakhya, a form of Sakti, is the most dominating name, and her temple, one of the Sakti Pithas, at Nilachal occupies a prominent place in the early history not only of Assam but also of eastern India. It is the most holy and famous shrine of the sect, and its worship was associated with various rites, mantras, mudras and sacrifices.¹⁵ The temple is said to have been first created by Naraka of the Epic age. In course of time the temple disappeared and went into oblivion. Viswa Singha, the first Koch king however, had the fortune of rediscovering the holy spot by accident, and he built the temple on the hill.

It is generally believed that Kamrupa or Assam was the home of Tantricism. The Kamakhya temple at Guwahati, the Kechaikhati temple of Sadiya, the Mahadeva temple at Dergaon, and the network of Sakta temples in North Lakhimpur area bear proof of the extent of Tantric influence in Kamrupa. Today, the Kamakhya cult plays a symbolic role in the religious, social, and cultural life of the Assamese Hindus. Even though the Vaishnav tradition is predominant, goddess Kamakhya has a universal appeal among the Hindu society in Assam. The RSS considers the Kamakhya- Assamese- Hindu- India connection, very suitable to its needs. It equates Kamakhya with the worship of ‘Sakti’ or ‘Durga’ as is prevalent in the Hindi heartland, and thus draws a link to show the commonality of Hindu traditions between the northeast and mainstream Indian Hindu

¹³ Nishipad Devchoudhury, ‘Archaeology of Assam with Special Reference to Central Assam’, in *Pragjyotisapur Through Ages*, op. cit. p.12.

¹⁴ *Hinduism in Assam*, J.R.A.S., 1920, p. 1153, as cited in B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, op. cit ,p. 166.

¹⁵ B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, op. cit, p. 167.

society. It may be mentioned here that during the annual *Ambubasi*¹⁶ mela held every year, thousands of sadhus and sanyasis (mostly saffron clad) from different parts of India, gather in Kamakhya. While some sadhus are experts in occult rituals, others render soulful songs on life and its many meanings. Some sport long locks and nails while others play the bugle to appease the goddess. This provides a favorable climate to the *Hindutvavadis* who actively participate in this event.

Medieval Assam:

Entry of Ahoms:

Medieval Assam witnessed the entry of Ahoms, in the early years of the 13th century. The Ahoms were an important offshoot of the Tai race of people. They entered the Brahmaputra valley from the east and conquered the indigenous tribes like the Morans, and the Borahis, one after the other, reconciled them and gradually by the end of the 15th century became the masters of the whole of Assam up to Goalpara. Thus according to Edward Gait, the present name of Assam is derived from the name of Ahom rulers. He says: “the tradition of the Ahoms themselves is that the present name is derived from Ahom in the sense of unequal or fearless”.¹⁷ By the first half of the sixteenth century, this Ahom kingdom grew in size and population after the conquest of the Chutiya kingdom on the Northeast, that of Kacharis in the south- west and the Bhuyan chiefs in the west and the north- west. During the seventeenth century, the kingdom was further enlarged by the annexation of Kamrupa. The Tai- Ahoms the earliest migrants, had their own religious traditions and systems of worship. In most Tai societies, the most significant apparition was the notion of Phii (spirit) and Khwan (life essence).¹⁸ The language and religion of the Ahoms were distinct from those of the conquered races, but gradually the Ahom

¹⁶ Legend has it that every year on the seventh day of the Assamese month of Aahar, , goddess Sati, i.e, Kamakhya, who symbolises shakti (power) has her periods. Consequently, during Ambubasi, when the sun is in the Mithuna Rasi (zodiac period of Gemini), the doors of the Kamakhya temple remain closed for three days. The devotees are not allowed to worship the goddess during these three days and religious rituals are not held either. It is only on the fourth day that the doors of the temple are opened for their devotees to pay their obeisance.

¹⁷ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, 2nd Edition, (Calcutta & Simla: Thacker Spink & Co., 1926), p. 245.

¹⁸ Lipi Ghosh, Ethnicity, Secularism and Religious Tolerance: The Role of Ahoms in Assam Society', in Bimal J. Deb (ed.), *Ethnic Issues , Secularism and Conflict Resolutions in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Concept, 2006), p.179

rulers accepted the Assamese language and the Hindu religion, and the change was perceptible from the reign of Pratap Singh(1603- 1641).¹⁹

Acceleration of Hinduisation in Assam: ‘Aryanisation’ of the province:

The advent of the Ahom rule over upper Assam in 1228 was gradually marked with a greater interaction between the Ahoms and a section of the population who subscribed to diverse Hindu traditions. According to Hieun Tsang, the Chinese traveler and historian, who visited India in the first half of the seventh century, Bhaskaravarman, the king of Kamrupa, popularized the Ramayana- Mahabharata tradition in his kingdom with the help of Brahmins and forged close links with King Harshavardhana of northern India, whose seat of power was Kanauj.

The crucial factors responsible for the growth of Ramayana- Mahabharata tradition were the Brahmins of northern India who played missionary roles in the propagation of Hindu religion and culture among all sections of society.²⁰ The immigrant Brahmins soon Hinduised the ruling princes and brought them within the pale of Aryanisation, giving them the divine theory of kingship and designating them as Kshatriyas. Epigraphic and literary records show that as early as Naraka, the legendary ruler of Kamrupa, divinity was attributed to the king. In fact Naraka was known as the son of Lord Vishnu and the Mother Earth (Bhumi), and hence forth all rulers of this land claimed this ancestry.²¹ With the spread of Aryan culture of Aryadhama in Assam, Hindu religion in its various forms became very popular, and even some non- Aryan people accepted Hinduism. The Nidhanpur Copper Plate grant records that king Bhutivarman (6th century A.D.) granted special Agrahara settlements to more than two hundred Brahmanas of various *gotras* and *vedasakhas* for promotion of Vedic religion and culture. Traces of early Aryan

¹⁹ S.K. Bhuyan, *A History of Assam, 1681- 1826 A.D.*, (Guwahati: Gauhati University, 1933) p.18.

²⁰ B.P. Singh, ‘North- East India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis’ in *Modern Asian Studies*, 21, 2 (1987), p. 259- 60.

²¹ Anamika Neog, ‘Practice of Vedic Rites in Early Assam: The Coronation Ceremony and the Asvamedha Sacrifice’, in Manorama Sharma (ed.), *Proceedings of North East India History Association, Twentieth Session*, (Dibrugarh: Dibrugarh University, 2000) p. 80.

settlements of the Kalitas are found in the Sadiya district of eastern Assam. They not only established Aryan settlements with their own people but brought the earlier inhabitants into their fold by giving them Aryan religion, rites and language. In this process of Aryanisation even tribes' names were changed to caste names.²²

The adoption of the Hindu faith by the Ahom kings and the active patronage of Hinduism during the seventeenth century under the rule of Rudra Singha and Siva Singha hastened the assimilation of many of the tribes into the Hindu fold and the idea of a composite Assamese identity made up of both the caste- Hindus and the plain- tribals began to emerge. In the words of Mosahary, "it was the Aryan conquest of the various non-Aryans or the aborigines of North East India that led to their absorption into the Aryan society, and the inevitable acceptance by them of the Sanskritic culture and language. It was not the Bodos alone but also other aboriginal tribes of Assam such as the Mikirs, Manipuris, the Lalungs, etc., who succumbed to the universal Hinduisation by the Aryans who came to Assam with more Advanced culture."²³ In the 15th and 16th centuries, the spread of reformist Hindu Vaishnavism throughout the Brahmaputra valley of Assam had already prepared the ground for bringing in tribals within the Hindu fold.²⁴

Based on these facts, the RSS argues that in language and religion, Assam was distinctly Indian. Assamese itself is an Indo- Aryan language. What is today known as "Assamese" or "Asamiya" as a labeling of a community of people is related to the process of Aryanisation as well as to the rise and consolidation of Ahom rule in the Brahmaputra Valley. They further argue that the "Sanskrit speaking people" penetrated into Assam slowly from the western region, through Burma, during the early centuries of the Christian era or a little earlier, intermarried with the local population, in time, and converted the local population from Buddhism to Hinduism. These Aryan people came with a 'new outlook', settled in the Brahmaputra valley and gave a new phase of

²² B.K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, op.cit., pp. 8- 9.

²³ R.N. Mosahary, 'Social History of the Boros of Assam, a Study of Oral History', 1986, as cited in Sujata Miri, (ed.), *Communalism in Assam: A Civilizational Approach* (New Delhi: Har Anand, 1993) p. 58.

²⁴ Udayon Misra, 'Identity Transformation and the Assamese Community: Illusion and the Reality', in Kailash S. Aggarwal (ed.) *Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in North East India*, (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1999) p.99.

civilization to central Assam.²⁵ This is elaborated by references to Vedic literature again, which throws light on the Aryan penetration into this area, saying that the kingdom of Pragjyotisha or Kamrupa extended up to the river Karatoya in the west and was bounded by the Dikkarvasini (modern Dikrai river) in the east.

It is important to note here that the Aryan penetration is presented as a civilizing factor in the history of Assam by the Hindutva ideologues. The Aryan influence became so widespread, it is argued, that even minor Vedic customs and rituals became deep-rooted in the life of the common people. The Vedic custom of the worship of Indra by setting up the Indradhvaja, for instance, still survives in Assam in the popular festival of Bhatheli. The existing practice of animal sacrifice by strangling, on the Siva *caturdasi* day, is also a Vedic survival. But the greatest cultural influence of the Aryans which also brought unity among the diverse tribes and races of the province, claims Hindutva, was the language. Sanskrit became the language of the court, a medium of expression for poets, philosophers and preachers. In fact modern Assamese as an Aryan speech developed from Sanskrit around the 10th century. Ramesh Buragohain observed that Hinduisation had de-tribalised the formerly tribal people, bringing about marked changes in the socio-religious life of the otherwise tribal people. The Hinduisation or sanskritisation process, he says, "was a civilizing one, detribasation [or detribalisation] being its main current bringing about marked changes in the socio-religious life of the otherwise tribal people."²⁶

It may be true that the Brahmanical/ Aryan influence was an important factor in the formation of the Ahom state, but the ruling tribal princes in the early Brahmaputra Valley prior to their coming in contact with the Brahmanas had no idea about the Hindu ideal of kingship. Under the influence of the Aryan culture, they started adopting several of their practices and rites. Thus the performance of the coronation ceremony according to Vedic

²⁵ Nishipad Devchoudhury, 'Archaeology of Assam with Special Reference to Central Assam', in *Pragjyotishapur Through Ages*, op. cit, p.11.

²⁶ Ramesh Buragohain, 'Cross-Currents of the Hinduisation Process in Medieval Assam,' *The Proceedings of the North East India History Association, Tenth Session* (Shillong: NEIHA, 1989), 177.

rites, the *Asvamedha*²⁷ or the horse- sacrifice etc. began to take place gradually.²⁸ The ruling Ahoms had accepted Hinduism and so encouraged their subjects to do the same, adopted the Assamese language as the official language in place of their own Tai language, and finally patronized the Brahmana- Vaishnava priesthood by throwing away huge resources at them at the cost of the state.²⁹

An alternative school of thought argues that the Hinduisation process was an 'invasion' rather than a reformist or civilizational process. In its earliest history, Kamrupa was a land inhabited by the Kiratas, i.e. by non- Aryan and non- Hindu people. The Tai- Ahoms, the earliest migrants, had their own religious traditions and system of worship. In most Tai societies, the most significant apparition was the notion of *Phii* (spirit) and *Khwan* (life essence).³⁰ Girin Phukon further added that Ahoms realized over time that their adherence to Hinduism was a fundamental cause of their downfall. Through their acceptance of Hinduism he wrote, the common Ahom people were forced to be positioned at the lowest level of caste- hierarchy as outcaste- even lower than the Sudra caste.³¹ Moreover, Assam today witnesses a spurt of ethno political movements, by the Bodos, Bodo Kacharis, Koch Rajbongshis, Tai Ahoms etc, who claim indigeneity of religion, culture, language and faith. They consider the Indic-Sanskritic culture of India as a foreign culture, imposed on them forcibly over the centuries. This poses a great challenge to Hindutva's homogenizing project in Assam.

²⁷ In traditional Hindu political thought, the *Asvamedha* sacrifice was considered as a means to an end- the aggrandizement and expansion of the kingdom. It is believed that just as Indra with his teed defeats the Asuras, so also the earthly king by this sacrifice unites himself mysteriously with the sacrificial horse and obtains its magic power to defeat his enemies.

²⁸ The first known historical ruler in Kamrupa who is credited with the performance of the *Asvamedha* sacrifice was Mahendravarman (A.D. 45- 85) of the Varmana line of kings. The Nalanda Clay seals of Bhaskaravarman testify that he performed two horse sacrifices. Mahendravarman's grandson, Bhutivarman, is also credited with the performance of an *Asvamedha* sacrifice in his Barganga inscription. (See Anamika Neog, 'Practice of Vedic Rites in Early Assam: The Coronation Ceremony and the *Asvamedha* Sacrifice', in Manorama Sharma (ed.), *Proceedings of North East India History Association, Twentieth Session*, op.cit, pp.82-83).

²⁹ R. Buragohain, 'On Brahminical Influence in the Formation of the Ahom State', in Jayanta B. Bhattacharjee(ed.) *Proceedings of North East India History Association, Eighth Session*, (Kohima: NEIHA, 1987), p.170.

³⁰ Lipi Ghosh, 'Ethnicity, Secularism and Religious Tolerance: The Role of Ahoms in Assam Society', in Bimal J. Deb (ed.), *Ethnic Issues, Secularism and Conflict Resolutions in Northeast India* op. cit, p. 179.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

The Advent of the Muslims:

In Assam two groups among the adherents of Islam are easily identifiable. The first group of Muslims came during the thirteenth century, and they are popularly known as Assamese Muslims in the Brahmaputra valley. The second group came from East Bengal during British rule and thereafter this group is referred to as Bengali Muslims. The latter are in fact far more superior in numerical strength than the former, considering that immigration from Bangladesh is still continuing at a massive scale in the state.

History tells us that Assam came into contact with the Muslims for the first time in the early part of the thirteenth century when Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji, a Muslim general of Qutubuddin led a Turkish army to this region. Following him, on several occasions, other Muslim invaders came to Assam, though most of them were defeated. In the middle of the sixteenth century, a Muslim army, commanded by Tubark invaded Assam. Tubark was defeated and killed while some of his soldiers were taken captive by the Ahom kings. They were given settlement in different parts of Assam and they took up the job of working on brass metal.³²

It is important to note here that though the Mughal power spread across northern and eastern India, they could never conquer Assam. By 1682, the repeated Mughal invasions were wiped out and since then the western limit of the Tai- Ahom kingdom had been the river Manaha on the north and the Nagarbera hills on the south of the Brahmaputra which remained intact till the British annexation of the kingdom.³³ Thus observed Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, that "Assam retained its independence in its various sections right down to 1826."³⁴

³² This occupation is still followed by many of their descendants, known as Marias

³³ Lipi Ghosh, 'Ethnicity, Secularism and Religious Tolerance: The Role of Ahoms in Assam Society', in , in Bimal J. Deb (ed.), *Ethnic Issues , Secularism and Conflict Resolutions in Northeast India*, op. cit, p. 179.

³⁴ Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*(Guwahati: Dept. of Publication, University of Guwahati, 1970) p. 4.

In the mid seventeenth century again, a Muslim saint Hazarat Shah Milan by name, but popularly known as Azan Fakir came to Assam. He was a Syed and he promoted and stabilized Islam in Assam. Many local people were converted to Islam because of his influence. However, most of these conversions took place through marriage, because the Muslim soldiers did not bring their wives with them. Also, the Ahom kings encouraged certain Muslim artisan families to migrate to Assam and take part in various activities. Thus there was slow incorporation of Muslims into Assam over a long period of time. In this way the traditional Assamese Muslim community, which gradually came into being, includes the descendants of the Muslim soldiers, the artisan families, the Muslim preachers and the local converts. All these Assamese Muslims belong to the Sunni sect of Islam.

Moreover, during the neo- Vaishnavite movement, the Assamese Muslims were assimilated into the local culture. Today the Assamese Muslims are proud of the Assamese language and culture. The cultural impact is so overwhelming in societal relations that the Assamese Muslims are closer to the Assamese Hindus than to their co-religionist Bengali Muslims.

Bhakti Movement: Sankardev's Vaishnavism

The medieval period, (especially 1400-1650), witnessed the Bhakti movement in India. Essentially a reformist movement, it swept the entire country for the restoration of Hinduism based on Bhakti cult and was built around the heroes of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata: Rama and Krishna. Saivism, Saktism and Vaishnavism, all came under the influence of Bhakti and changed in the process. Simplification of rituals and translation of the religious texts into the vernacular played a formative role in popularizing Bhakti.³⁵ As part of this reformist movement, a neo- Vaishnavite movement started in Assam. Liberal Vaishnavism, propounded by Sankardev, replaced the Tantrik Vaishnavism. With the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, a liberal faith '*Ekasaraniya Nama Dharma*'

³⁵ Harekrishna Deka, 'The Assamese Mind: Contours of a Landscape', in Geeti Sen (ed.), *Where the Sun Rises when Shadows Fall* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 194.

(monotheism), founded by Sankardev, became very popular among the non- Brahmanical Assamese people.

The Ahom kings believed in Tai and Hindu rituals while the Koch Kings, another important ruling clan, were devotees of the Sakta cult, and human sacrifices were common. What Sankardev tried and did succeed in great measure was in his efforts to rid Hindu religion of its magical rituals and beliefs. He established several Sattras (monasteries) where prayers were held and religious discourses were given. The Ambari Stone Inscription, dated 1154 Saka, reveals the origin of the sattra institutions in Assam. For instance, S.N. Sharma, states that the “Neo- Vaishnavite institution which was responsible for establishing and spreading the new cult is the Sattra institution, the nucleus of which was formed during the lifetime of Sankardev”.³⁶ They became centres of equality among castes and tribes. Gradually these Sattras developed into cultural centres, where devotional songs (Bargeet), dance forms (called Sattriya dance as it evolved through Sattras), drama (Ankiya Naat) and the prayer system (shravana- kirtana) became very popular. Naamghars (prayer halls) and Kirtanghars were set up in most villages and the sattradhikars and senior priests or *gosains* visited them even from far-flung areas of the Jaintia, Cachar and Arunachal hills. As a result of this, Krishna became the key- figure in social life and came to dominate the religious as well as the entire gamut of thought processes of the people of this region. After Sri Sankardev, his ‘Ekasaraniya Nama Dhārma’ was split into four sub- sects , the Brahma, the Purusa, the Kala and the Nika Samhatis. But it remains the major faith in Assam and has been the dominating influence in the social, cultural and religious life of the people. The organization now numbers about 100,000 members and claims to be the largest religious body in Assam. It draws its support from the lower castes- Kooch, Chutiya, Ahom- rather than the higher- Kayastha, Kalita, Keot- and from the younger generation rather than the older which is a source of much family conflict.³⁷

³⁶ S.N. Sharma, op.cit, p.12.

³⁷ Audrey Cantile, *The Assamese*, (London: Curzon Press, 1984), p. 277.

The Sankardev Sangha was essentially an anti- Brahman movement. The Brahmanas number probably only 150,000 in Assam but they are over represented in government service, teaching and the bar which, before independence, were largely Brahman preserves.³⁸ The universalistic ethic of the Bhagavata Purana which opens salvation to all irrespective of caste or tribe was seen as an anticipation of the modern emphasis on equality and the abolition of caste distinctions. Even the adherents of Islam were welcomed.

The cultural life of Assam today revolves around two important cultural and religious institutions: the *sattras* (the seat of a religious head, the *sattradhikar*) and the *naamghar* (the house of names or the prayer hall). The *sattras* have been in existence for more than 400 years. Interestingly, these institutions have now become important centres for the dissemination of Hindu ideas. The Vaishnavite population, especially in the villages, generally associate on the basis of membership of a local *naamghar*, whose members describe them as 'one people' or 'raij'.

The Sankardev Sangha is active in every sphere of society and contains a number of organizers who go from house to house and arrange public meetings in likely areas. They work also among tea- garden labour and tribal peoples and claim two or three Muslim converts occasionally. The activities of the Sankardev Sangh thus mingle well with that of the 'Sangh Parivar' and the two actively support each other in social and cultural activities in Assam. Moreover the mass appeal of the Sankardev Sangh and its popularity even among the lower caste Hindus, helps Hindutva to reach out to these people.

Modern Assam: Colonial Rule

In 1817, the Burmese invaded Assam and several people therefore fled to the hills, to Cachar, to Manipur, and the whole region was depopulated. The English intervened and defeated the Burmese in several battles in Assam. By the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the Burmese renounced all claims upon Assam and the English appointed David Scott as

³⁸Ibid, p. 278.

the Agent of the Governor- General in the state. By 1842, the whole of Assam Valley came under the British rule, and it was administered as an outlying district of Bengal.

After the British took over Assam, they converted it into a completely primary producing economy, with the establishment of tea, jute and opium plantations. However, a major obstacle to this was the lack of an adequate labour supply. In the words of Edward Gait:

“There are very few landless labourers in Assam and people who have land naturally prefer to the independence and ease of their position as cultivators to the discipline and regular labour of the tea gardens. It was thus found necessary at a very early stage, to seek for tea garden coolies elsewhere and in 1853 the Assam Company had already begun to import labourers from Bengal”.³⁹

Aboriginal tribesmen of Chotanagpur (Bihar), and the neighborhood were recruited, brought to Assam, and provided with housing in return for a contract that indentured them to their employers. A substantial number of tea garden labourers settled in Assam as cultivators, either as landholders or tenants in land provided by the government.

The plantation economy in turn generated a network of secondary economic activities. Administration was successfully prevailed upon by the planters to build roads and bridges and to ply steamer services on the Brahmaputra. Traders and bankers from other Indian provinces flocked to Assam and in the absence of local acumen, they provided the economy with the necessary services of trading and banking. To provide for the packaging purposes, required for the export of tea, a plywood industry came up. All these factors helped the rapid growth of the population of the Brahmaputra valley. But the economic growth was entirely limited to its foreign- owned and foreign- managed sector.⁴⁰ British traders, tea planters, as well as Marwari businessmen and middle class Bengalis began to move into Assam by slow degrees. Thus for example, the Marwaris, a traditional trading community from Rajasthan, entered Assam and, though numerically

³⁹ Gait, *A History of Assam*, 2nd Edition, op. cit., p.361.

⁴⁰ Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle & Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826- 1947*, (New Delhi : Indian Council for Historical Research, 1977), p. 19.

small, were particularly visible in the larger towns.⁴¹ Marwari traders and money lenders big and small (locally known as Kaiyers) established themselves not only in the towns and tea gardens, but also in remote villages of the interior. In official reports they were referred to as “the ubiquitous Kaiya”. As Assam’s links to the rest of India grew, other migrants moved there as traders, merchants, bankers, moneylenders, and small industrialists.⁴²

Christianity:

With the advent of the British came the wave of Christianity. Since the coming of the British and American missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries, Christianity made a steady progress in the North- East especially in the hill tribal areas.⁴³ The missionaries slowly spread their activities in all spheres of the tribal societies. With the publication of *Arunodaya*, a Baptist monthly in Assamese, the translation of the Bible into Assamese, the transcription of tribal languages into Roman script, the establishment of hospitals and the spread of the idea of health care, and the founding of schools and colleges for both boys and girls, Christianity found a solid ground in Assam.⁴⁴ However their activities were centred mostly on the tribal people, particularly the hill tribes, now inhabiting the adjoining states of Assam. The conversion of animists to Christianity occurred on a phenomenal scale. The introduction of Christianity was a new civilizational process and led to growth in literacy and better health care. For the tribals it meant the stopping of head hunting. It also led to tribal languages being reduced to writing. At the same time,

⁴¹ Even today, migrants in Assam, both from across the border and from the rest of the country, dominate the modern sector of economy. While the Marwaris from Rajasthan control the entire trade and commerce, and tea, jute and plywood industries, the hardy Punjabis dominate in the field of government contracts and supplies, transport, furniture and sports goods, and the Bengalis corner bulk of the white collar jobs and outshine the natives in various professions. The entire labour force and rickshaw and cart-pullers are migrants from Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh; sweepers mostly Namdari Sikhs from Punjab; majority of truck drivers are either Punjabis, Nepalese, Bengalis or Biharis; barbers by and large are Bengalis and Biharis; and carpenters, masons and other skilled and semi- skilled workers are again either Punjabis or Biharis or Bengalis. See V.I.K. Sarin, *India’s North- East in Flames*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1980), p. 49.

⁴² Myron Weiner, *The Political Demography of Assam’s Anti- Immigrant Movement*, *Population and Development Review* 9, No. 2. , June 1983, p. 283

⁴³ In present day Assam, the percentage of Christians is 3.32 according to the 2001 census. The proportion of Christians is highest in North Cachar Hills, followed by Karbi Anglong, Darang, Goalpara and Dibrugarh.

⁴⁴ Sujata Miri, *Communalism in Assam: A Civilizational Approach* (New Delhi: Har Anand, 1993), p.60-61.

these developments led to loosening of the intra- tribal bond of unity and decline in the authority of the tribal chiefs.

The proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries today, provide enough fodder to the RSS activists to mobilize the tribal people against 'their nefarious designs'. The Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, an affiliate especially created by the Sangh to work among the tribal people, plays an active in the tribal belts of Assam today, to dissuade tribals from being converted into the Christian faith. (Details of the same shall be discussed in the next chapter). It may noted here that as much as westernization through Christianity and western educational system can be seen to have uprooted the people from their cultural soil, it must be noted that Hinduisation has also uprooted the people from their indigenous culture. If Christianity is to be blamed for the modernizing changes that have "civilized" and thereby de-tribalised the tribal people, the same allegation can be leveled against Hinduism.⁴⁵

Classification of Communities:

When the British entered Assam, they were confronted by a region entirely unexplored till then by the Europeans, and a diversity of communities therein.⁴⁶ The colonial administration's obsession with fixing the boundaries of people and territory led to the creation of new labels, thus initiating the process of defining and sharpening the existing communities in Assam. The decennial census, started in 1871, organized the diverse people into a hierarchy of castes and tribes.

Tribal and Non Tribal

The people of Assam came to be divided into two broad categories: tribal and non tribal. Most of these tribes had their own languages. The British used several labels and descriptions to describe them; such as "Dooaneeah", "a mixed race"; "Muttuck", "hill tribe"; "Naga", "marauding hill tribe"; "Kookie", "robber tribe"; "Singhpo", "warlike

⁴⁵ Lalsangkima Pachuau, "'Tribal' Identity And Ethnic Conflicts In North-East India: A Christian Response', op. cit.

⁴⁶ Yasmin Saikia, *Assam and India, Fragmented Memories, Cultural Identity and the Tai-Ahom Struggle*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005.)

frontier tribe”; “Jainitia and Kachari”, “freebooters and plunderers”; “Mishmi”, “lazy and barbaric hill tribe”; “Abor”, “uncouth- mannered hill tribe”; “Simong”, “hostile tribe”, “Miri”, “dirty and exceedingly poor tribe”; and “Aka”, “dirty tribe”.⁴⁷

Over time, the colonial administration found it difficult to subdue the tribal communities, and therefore, demarcated their area by the “inner line”. The earliest census of India (Assam), 1891 listed the faith of most of the people who may be called tribals as animism. “From old legends it would appear the earliest religion of the aborigines, namely the Kacharis, with who are allied the Koch, Chutiya and Moran (Matak) peoples, was animism and a worship of demons, etc.”⁴⁸ In fact most of the plain tribals of Assam were seen as either animistic or as Hinduised.⁴⁹

The non- tribal category included the ‘caste Hindus’, scheduled castes⁵⁰ and the Muslims. The British identified the following populations as scheduled castes: Bansphor, Bhuinmali, Mali, Brittial Bania, Bania, Dhupi, Dhobi, Dugla, Dholi, Hira, Jalkeot, Jhalo, Malo, Jhalo- Malo, Kaibarta, Jaliya, Lalbegi, Mahara, Mehtar, Bhangi, Muchi, Rishi, Namasudra, Patni, and Sutradhar.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 56-57.

⁴⁸ L.W. Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North- East Frontier*, (London: Macmillan, 1914) p. 71.

⁴⁹ R.N. Mosahary disagrees with this labeling of the religion of the indigenous tribals. The traditional religion of the Bodos according to him is not animistic but *Balthouism*, presided over by supreme *God Bathau Brai or Bathau Raja*. *Bathau Brai* is also known as *Sibrai* which is identified with Siva, of the Hindu trinity. Siva is non Aryan God and is the sanskritised name of the Boro god *Sibrai, Siwbrai or Jiwbrai* and hence was not taken in the rank of Gods by the Aryans. Manao, is believed to be the chief of the domestic female deities, the guardian and the protectress of the household, family wealth and paddy in the field, and is equivalent to the popular Hindu goddess “Lakshmi”. [See R.N., ‘Social History of the Boros of Assam, a Study of Oral History’, 1986, as cited in Sujata Miri, *Communalism in Assam: A Civilizational Approach* (New Delhi: Har Anand, 1993), p. 56.]

⁵⁰ At present, the SC s and ST s represent 6.24% and 10.99% of the population respectively.

⁵¹ Unlike in some other parts in India, casteism is not practised very rigidly in Assamese Hindu society. Various reasons can be attributed for this liberal ethos of the Assamese society. One may be the Vaishnavite movement launched by Sankardev, another may be the fact that Assam came under the influence of the Aryan culture at a much later date and hence casteism could not gain a strong foothold. Moreover, the socio- cultural background of the earlier non- Aryan settlers of Assam might have been another factor to stand against easy spread of casteism.

The 1911 census records Hinduism as the predominant faith of the state followed by the Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh faiths.

Hindus

Among the Hindus⁵², two broad categories of castes were recognized. These were the 'Bamun' (Brahmin) and the Sudir (Sudra: non- Brahmin). Alongside the British codification of Assamese, internal formulations were also under construction. While the local leaders readily accepted the colonial name, Assamese, to refer to themselves, they focused on constructing positive markers of community identification and suggested Assamese was a 'blended' community constituted by Hindus and non-Hindus who were bound together by shared social interactions facilitated by the Assamese language.⁵³ In 1836, a petition by Moniram Dewan, the appointed agent of the colonial administration's rule in Assam, outlined a definition of the "Assamese". Moniram defined the Assamese "jati" as comprising various peoples: Brahmans, Keots, Koch, Bor Koleeta, Soroo Koleeta, Hindu Chutiya, Ahom, Borook, Moran, Chandal, Gorea, Dom, Hari, Maria etc. Moniram thus tried to represent the Assamese as a composite, multiplex, fluid society that included the ruling class of Ahom, as well as Brahmanic Hindus, various groups of "untouchables", and Muslims(Gorea) to name a few. The blending of the various people into the Assamese produced a term with no clear boundaries or history. As such the term became popular, and a population called the "Assamese" in the northeast frontier slowly emerged as different from the people living in the hills.

Muslims

Assamese history is complex because although it belongs to everyone who lives in Assam, it is not the story of a specific community in the general terms of "ethnic" and "religious communities. The social composition of Assam is strongly influenced by two inseparable historical facts- the extraordinary role of Bangladeshi immigrants and their

⁵²In terms of religion Assam displays a vast array of variety. According to the 2001 census, the Hindus form 67.13% of the population, the Muslims 28.43%, while the Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains form 3.32%, 0.07%, 0.29% and 0.09% respectively.

⁵³ Yasmin Saikia, 'The Tai Ahom Connection' in <http://www.indiaseminar.com/2005/550/550%20yasmin%20saikia.htm>, as viewed on 19th December, 2006.

ethnic cultural diversity.⁵⁴ The indigenous population of the state underwent a drastic transformation after the British conquest of Assam. The immigration of hordes of people from erstwhile East Bengal and Bangladesh, and to a certain extent from other parts of the country itself, led to the arrival of several communities into Assam, thus changing the demographic structure of the state. This had far reaching political and social implications in Assam, which shall be discussed below.

The Bengali Muslims, often referred to as 'Mymensinghians' by the Assamese Hindus, mostly started migrating in huge numbers towards the beginning of the 20th century and continue to do so even today. They were viewed with contempt and suspicion by the local people, primarily because, by sheer number, they posed as a threat to the identity of the "Assamese". However, once Assamese was made the official language in the Brahmaputra valley, these Muslims were quick to seize the opportunity of identifying themselves with the Assamese. As this section of Assamese- speaking immigrant Muslims started growing, Assamese socio- cultural organisations accepted them first as "Na Asamiya" or neo- Assamese and then as Assamese. They adopted Assamese as their mother tongue and even sided with the Assamese during the language movements of 1960 and 1972. The Assamese people were grateful to the immigrant Muslims for returning Assamese as their mother tongue, thereby ensuring the majority status of the Assamese language and defeating the "connivance" of the Bengali Hindu to reduce Assam into a bilingual state.⁵⁵ But with the change in the demographic settlement pattern, occasions of interaction between these groups have been considerably reduced.

The History of immigration: Colonial Assam

In Assam, there were two phases of immigration during the period of British rule 1826-1905 and 1905 to 1947. In the first phase of immigration, mainly three classes of people migrated into the state- tea plantation labourers, Amolas (office employees from Sylhet, Dacca, Mymensingh, Rampur and other districts of Bengal) and merchants and

⁵⁴ Sandhya Goswami, 'Assam', in Paul Wallace and Ramashray Roy (ed.), *India's 1999 Elections and Twentieth Century Politics* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003), p. 273.

⁵⁵ Udayon Misra, 'Identity Transformation and the Assamese Community: Illusion and the Reality', in Kailash S. Aggarwal (ed.) *Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in North East India*, op. cit, p.107.

tradesmen from Rajasthan and Bengal.⁵⁶ The second phase was marked by the influx of Muslim peasants of East Bengal districts who started settling in rural areas of Assam.

The need to induct outsiders into Assam first arose owing to acute manpower shortage. On assuming power, the first thing the British did was to systematically exclude the Ahom oligarchy and all its retainers from the state machinery. The new administrative offices and titles created by the British, such as 'tehsildars' or district revenue collector, were not based on indigenous Ahom administrative structures, but were adapted from British governance in Bengal. Hence the British increasingly imported Bengali officers to work in Assam. This resulted in the formation of a new elite group- the Bengali elite, in the Assamese society. They accommodated themselves in the enlarging apparatus of bureaucracy, railways and other industries. This aroused a lot of resentment within the Assamese people against the Bengali community. With the introduction of Bengali, as the official language of Assam, in 1830s, the matter got even worse. After a deep rooted, politico- cultural movement, the Assamese language was officially resorted in 1871.

Immigration from East Bengal:

The origins of immigration into Assam from East Bengal, began at the turn of the twentieth century when Assam's "virgin lands were opened up for settlement by landless peasants from East Bengal."⁵⁷ In order to increase the production of jute, the British and the Assamese landlords encouraged the landless peasants from East- Bengal- who were already migrating into Assam in small numbers for better prospects – to come into this region. This led to the opening of floodgates for the people of erstwhile East Pakistan in search of and, to the sparsely populated Brahmaputra. The East Bengal peasants were much more skilled than the local Assamese peasants, in the art of agriculture, as they were already trained in growing jute. As more East Bengal peasants moved into Assam they cleared the forests and for the first time converted the whole of Brahmaputra region into a settled and rich cultivate area. At the beginning, quite a large proportion of the migrants from East Bengal were Hindus but as the flow increased, Muslims became the

⁵⁶ Alaka Sarmah, *Immigration and Assam Politics*, (New Delhi: Ajanta, 1999), p.p. 4-5.

⁵⁷ Sanjib Kumar Baruah, A Cudgel of Chauvinism or Tangled Nationality Question, *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 15, 1980, p. 543.

preponderant element. The predominance among outsiders in Assam was of Bengali speaking people- both Hindu and Muslim. The Bengali elites of both Hindu and Muslim communities in Assam encouraged and patronized the destitute immigrant settlers from East Bengal.

Girin Phukan, writes,⁵⁸

“the upper strata of the then Assamese society also welcomed the importation of immigrant labour and did not suffer from a ‘xenophobia’ of the later period...In fact, the Assamese elite of the nineteenth century were convinced that no economic progress was possible unless the then depopulated condition was restored to normalcy. Even some Assamese *Mahajans* provided a substantial part of the necessary finance to enable the immigrant peasants to bring virgin soil under the plough. At the same time, most of them encouraged the influx of men to Assam with a view to employing cheap labour in their fields and homesteads. Over and above the corrupt revenue officers, most of whom were Assamese, also gave settlement to the immigrants.”

Creating an “Assamese Identity”:

Many kinds of people make up the Assamese today. But with the expansion of colonialism and the emergence of new communities of non- Assamese speakers within Assam, complications of who is “Assamese” also surfaced. At this stage, the Assamese language became the key signifier of those who are “Assamese”, and as a result, those speaking other languages became recognized as “others”. Bengali speakers in particular were seen as a threat to the preservation of Assamese identity. In fact, the ideology of separation- cultural, political, and social- that was articulated in this period resurfaced many times even in postcolonial Assam alongside the definite and concerted effort of the national state to claim Assam as a Hindu majority state. The emphasis on language as an identity marker was very effective in the face of Bengali penetration and degradation of the local community.

British Policy of Divide and Rule: Polarization of the Hindus and Muslims

The influx from erstwhile East Bengal got accelerated in the early twentieth century. Assam was more sparsely populated than East Bengal. The largest single influx came

⁵⁸ Girin Phukan, *Ethnicisation of Politics in Northeast India*, (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 2003), p. 90.

from Mymensingh district, one of the most densely populated districts in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). The policy of encouraging immigration into Assam affected the demographic situation in such a manner that the

“non- indigenous population of Assam proper increased from less than a lac in a total population of 15 lacs in 1872 to an estimated five to six lacs in total population of about 22 lacs in 1901...non- indigenous element came to constitute at least one quarters of the population of Assam proper in 1901.”⁵⁹

By 1911 as many as 118,000 migrants had moved into the district of Goalpara alone, representing 20 percent of the population. In the next two decades the Muslim migrants moved further up the Brahmaputra valley. Though some Muslims had settled in Assam as early as thirteenth century, this new influx rapidly changed the religious as well as linguistic composition.

Also, the then Census Superintendent of Assam, C.S. Mullan, ICS, remarked in 1931:

“Probably the most important event in the province during the last twenty- five years- an event, moreover, which seems likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders, the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization- has been the invasion of a vast horde of land- hungry Bengali militants, mostly Muslims, from the districts of Eastern Bengal in general and Mymensingh in particular.... It is sad but by no means improbable that in another thirty years, Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home.”

Clearly, the divide and rule policy of the British found a home base in Assam, as it had already done elsewhere in India. Notwithstanding the fact that the immigrants contributed to the economic prosperity of the province by cultivating certain useful crops like ahurice jute, pulses and vegetables, they were considered a serious threat to the cultural identity of the indigenous people including even the Assamese Musalmans in general.⁶⁰

Prior to 1937, the relationship between the Hindus and Muslims were cordial in Assam. The merger of Sylhet, a Muslim majority East Bengal district with Assam, allowed the Muslim League to emerge as a strong political force in Assam, leading to the installation of a Muslim League Ministry in the late 1930s under Sir Mohammad Saddullah, who

⁵⁹ Amiya Kumar Das, *Assam's Agony, A Socio Economic and Political Analysis*, (New Delhi: 1982) p. 25.

⁶⁰ Swarnalata Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, (New Delhi: 2002), p. 573.

subsequently championed the cause of the immigrants. As the then Viceroy, Lord Wavell wrote in the Viceroy's Journal:

“the chief political problem is the desire of the Muslim ministers to increase this immigration into the uncultivated government land under the slogan “Grow More Food”, but what they are really after is “grow more Muslims”.

During the census operation of 1941, Suddullah instructed that the population should be classified on the basis of community (tribal and non-tribal) rather than religion. The politics behind this measure was that the Hindu in Assam becomes a minority minus the tribal population, compared to the growing Muslim population. Suddullah's communal ideas and his intention of transforming Assam into a Muslim majority state created a strong agitation amongst the Assamese Hindus.

This communal polarization of Hindus and Muslims provided the entry point to Hindutva in Assam. Presiding over the provincial Hindu Mahasabha held on 27th November 1941 at Guwahati, Veer Lavarkar, the president of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, suggested that the Hindus should resist all attempts to commit Assam into a Pakistan. The rhetoric of a threatening Muslim/ Bengali community that was likely to become a majority group in Assam whipped up sentiment and directed political action throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Post Colonial Assam: Demarcation of Boundaries

The political boundaries of Assam underwent changes from time to time, and this trend continued even in the post independence days. As a result of the partition of India, some portion of Assam, namely Sylhet went to East Pakistan in 1947. In 1963, Nagaland, which formed a district of Assam, was carved out into a separate state. Further the new state of Meghalaya, comprising the districts of Khasi and Jaintia hills, and Garo hills of Assam came into being in 1971. In the same year, Mizoram, a former district of Assam, was separated to give the former a new status of a Union Territory. In 1972, Arunachal, the former North- East- Frontier- Agency (NEFA) was also raised to the status of a Union Territory. At the end of the re- organization, a community called the Assamese was isolated from other groups in the northeast. The Brahmaputra valley was christened

Assam proper and deemed to be an Assamese space. The state is composed of the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak valley, and a hilly area made up of North Cachar and Karbi Anglong districts. The Brahmaputra valley is commonly divided into three regions namely: Upper, Middle and Lower Assam.⁶¹

Assam Movement:

An important event post independence, in Assam, was the Assam movement. The immigration from Bangladesh had reached its peak, particularly since 1971, with the creation of Bangladesh, when there was a large scale influx of Bangladeshi refugees into India. Due to sheer poverty, paucity of land and unemployment, a large number of Bangladeshis continued to enter India even after 1971 in search of jobs, through a long and porous border. While some of them went to West Bengal, some to other parts of the country, a large number of them settled in Assam. This phenomenon continued unabated for a long time, till the native Assamese population finally arose from their slumber and realized what was happening. The matter was taken up as an important political issue in the late 1970s, leading to a series of agitations by the All Assam Students Union.⁶²

The Assam movement spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), in opposition to this illegal immigration from Bangladesh, was the culmination of year long dissatisfactions over its serious implications on the state. To begin with three main issues were raised; first, detecting the foreign infiltrators, second, deleting their names from the voter's list, and third, deporting them from the country. It needs to be mentioned here that in 1978 and '79, the terms 'bideshi' (foreigners) and 'bahirgata' (outsiders), were used interchangeably. The movement created tension throughout the Brahmaputra valley and normalcy was paralyzed in all the plains districts of Assam, except Cachar, which was predominantly a Bengali bastion. The AASU leaders hoped that by identifying the "foreigners/Bangladeshis" they would be able to formulate an Assamese identity. But much before any constitutional process could be outlined for shaping the AASU rhetoric, violence

⁶¹ According to 2001 census, the present state of Assam covers an area of 78, 438 sq. kms., with a population of 26,655,528 persons. This is almost 2.4 % of the total geographical area of the country.

⁶² Prashant Bhushan, 'An Unconscionable Judgement', *Outlook*, August 3, 2005.

against so-called Bangladeshi Muslims became rampant. The spark of anti-Bangladeshi violence was lit in a small village called Nellie.⁶³ In the early months of 1983, the Assamese and local tribals violently turned against Bengali immigrants and descendants of immigrants. Four thousand people were massacred, a quarter of a million were made homeless, and thousands fled the state. Nellie became a testimony that the student-led movement had lost its non-violent, economic moorings and had become influenced by the religious politics that were driving a wedge into the Assamese community. Muslims of Assam became frightened that the Assamese identity movement was veering into a religious communal struggle.

The immigration problem in Assam, is the most important issue for the RSS in the state. It has become a convenient weapon to drive the wedge between the Hindus and the Muslims, and to mobilize Hindus against the Muslims in general, and the Bangladeshi immigrants in particular. The insecurity aroused by these people, particularly among the Assamese Hindus, are exploited largely by the RSS activists who have time and again highlighted this problem as 'a threat to national security' based on the malicious designs of the 'Miyans' to grab Assam as a part of their country. Undoubtedly this propaganda of hatred finds large appeal among the Hindu population who fear becoming a minority in their own state. The Bangladeshis or the Muslims, thus being the common enemy, there has been an attempt by the RSS to blend the Assamese identity struggle with that of the Hindutva enterprise. Spread of this fear psychosis has thus aggravated the feelings of communalism in Assam. Over the years the RSS has used this sentiment to spread its tentacles in this region and build up its organization slowly. The subsequent chapter shall explore in detail, the evolution of the Sangh Parivar in Assam, and its organization and modus operandi in the state.

⁶³ Yasmin Saikia, *Assam and India: Fragmented Memories, Cultural Identity and the Tai-Ahom Struggle*, op. cit., p. 65.

CHAPTER 2:

EVOLUTION OF THE SANGH PARIVAR IN ASSAM: ORGANIZATION, ISSUES AND PROGRAMMES

This chapter seeks to explore first, the RSS entered and expanded its network in Assam. Second, what were the issues and programmes it undertook in its expansion, through the organisation. Finally, it will also look at some of the leading affiliates, through which Hindutva has made inroads into different spheres.

Entry of the RSS:

Arrival of Pracharaks:

In 1946, December, the RSS deputed three pracharaks, namely, Dadarao Parmarth from Nagpur, Vasant Rao Oak and Shri Krishna Paranjpe to start their activities in Assam. After reaching Guwahati for the first time, they adopted the usual style of RSS operations in a new area- establishing and extending its sphere of influence through the local notables. In accordance with their strategy, they put up in the house of a youth representative named Shankarlal Batra. Along with Batra and another young Marwari businessman of Fancy bazaar named Keshavdeo Baawri, the first RSS *shakha* was set up on the ground of Shukreshwar temple, beside the Brahmaputra river. Along with Dadarao Parmarth a little later, came Bhau Mulkar, Dutta Bandisht, Shri Kulkarni, Shri Sahasrabhojne and other pracharaks from Nagpur. At that time, Sylhet was a part of Assam, and Shri Manohar Gurjar was the pracharak of the same. With the help of all these pracharaks, the RSS started its activities in places like Guwahati, Shillong, Dibrugarh, and Sylhet.¹

It must be noted here that the Marwaris in Assam, though numerically small, are highly influential and they have succeeded in monopolizing practically the whole of trade,

¹ Interview with Madhukar Limaye, (Senior Pracharak, RSS), Keshav Dham, Guwahati, Assam, June 28, 2006.

commerce, banking and credit of the state. They have established their own charitable institutions, *dharamshalas* (rest houses), temples, hospitals, Hindi- language newspapers, Hindi medium schools, and eating places.² The Marwaris therefore provide a natural support base for Hindutva in this region. They contribute liberally to the RSS' organisations and their activities in Assam.

After the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, the RSS was banned for some time. In December 1948 the RSS launched a nation wide Satyagraha against the ban. Fifty two activists from the Assam unit took an active role in this. Among these were, Keshav Deo Baawri, Girish Kalita, Shankarlal Tiwari and Shri Prafulla Kumar Bora of Guwahati. Dadarao Parmarth was arrested and detained in the Shillong jail. In July 1949, after the ban was lifted, Dadarao Parmarth left due to illness and Shri Dattopant Thengdi arrived in Assam. *Prant Pracharak* of Bengal, Shri Manohar Rao Harekar also took care of Sangh activities in Assam for some time. Towards the end of November 1949, Thakur Ramsingh of Punjab was appointed the *Prant Pracharak* of Assam. At that time, Bengal, Assam and Orissa were under the *Kshetriya Pracharak* head, Eknath Ranade.³

Building Networks through Local Notables:

In their attempt at spreading the RSS influence, the pracharaks took the help of several local Assamese intellectuals and notables.⁴ One of them was Kamakhayaram Barua, who was the judge of Guwahati High Court. He introduced the latter to several important people in Assam. Another local notable who actively supported the Sangh activities in its initial days in Assam, was Shri Radhikamohan Goswami of Nowgown. He also became the editor of a local Assamese weekly bulletin named 'Aalok' run by swayamsewaks.

⁵Similarly, Shri Giridhar Sharma, an eminent professor and principal of Arya college,

² V.I.K Sarin, *India's North East in Flames*, India's Northeast in Flames (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1980), pp. 59-60.

³ Interview with Shri Madhukar Limaye, op cit.

⁴ In Orissa they are called '*bishista byaktis*' See Pralay Kanungo, 'Hindutva's entry into a Hindu Province: Early years of RSS in Orissa', *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 2, 2003, p.3298.

⁵ Interview with Shri Dayal Borah, (Senior Pracharak, RSS) Keshav Dham, Guwahati, Assam, November 28, 2006.

Guwahati, helped in strengthening the Sangh activities in Assam and introduced the RSS in the Assamese circles. The association with these Assamese notables helped the RSS immensely, to gain the benefit of their socio- political links in the state, where it was struggling to establish a foothold. Giridhar Sharma was later made the *prant Sanghchalak* in 1974.

When Sangh activities started in Assam, people had different notions about the RSS. In its initial years in Assam, the RSS had to encounter several problems, most of which stemmed from a sense of suspicion and distaste for the organisation, after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Godse, who had been an RSS member at one point of time. The organisation suffered immense negative propaganda of the press and historians, academicians etc., and was mainly viewed as anti- Muslim, violent and the murderer of Gandhi. In spite of these circumstances, Thakur Ramsingh, the *prant pracharak*, was determined to carry forward his task. Besides his liaisons with the Assamese notables and Marwari businessmen, he toured extensively and set up new shakhas. While keeping command at the Guwahati headquarters, he strategically positioned an army of efficient non- Assamese, mainly Maharashtrian pracharaks in different parts of the Northeast. Among these pracharaks were, Shri Omprakash Trehan, followed by Madhukar Limaye, Madhavrao Mahedale, Pajhakar Wajhe, Sudhakar Deshpande, Appa Kulkarni, Vinayak Limaye etc. In those days, Sylhet was a part of Assam, and Shri Vasant Phadnis was appointed the *pracharak* therein.⁶

The RSS in Assam regularly invited its central leaders and organized public functions to propagate its ideology and encourage the new recruits. Golwalkar's annual visits were quite inspiring and motivated the recruits and activists. These visits also offered useful opportunities to interact with the notables at the state and district levels. In 1950, when Golwalkar visited Guwahati, he put up in the house of Shri Kamakhyaram, a local notable as mentioned before.

⁶ Interview with Shri Madhukar Limaye, op cit.

The Assam Earthquake, 1950:

In July 1949, the ban on the RSS was lifted. From 1950 onwards, the organization began active work in different places of Assam and picked up pace between 1959- 60. One of the RSS's initial breakthroughs in this region were made in 1950 when a massive earthquake shook the whole of upper Assam on the 15th of August leading to immense loss of men and materials. The situation was worsened by heavy floods in the Brahmaputra and its tributaries like the Dehang. Many villages were completely washed away and crops were destroyed. This led to an acute food problem. The RSS took this opportunity to become actively involved in relief work in the region. The Marwari Relief Society of Calcutta (a close associate of the RSS) sent some workers for relief work. The Assam branch of the RSS organized the *Assam Bhukamp Pidit Sahayta Samiti* (The Assam Earthquake Sufferers Relief Society) and distributed food, clothes and provided shelter to several victims of the earthquake.⁷ Naturally, this elicited a lot of popularity from the local people. During the protests against cow- slaughter in 1952, there were only 12 shakhas in Assam. In 1957, the first regional camp of the RSS was organized in Nowgown, in which 308 swayamsewaks had participated.

There were serious riots in Assam in 1959–60 when Bengal-speaking Hindu refugees, fleeing from Muslim East Pakistan, settled in Assam. The RSS took this opportunity to extend support to these Bengali Hindus, who in course of time became a solid block of support for the organization. In 1968 again, Assam witnessed the first communal riot in Karimganj, which though in a small scale, gave the Hindutva forces further fillip in the region.

During the Emergency, the RSS launched a nation wide Satyagraha to protest against it, in the course of which several Assamese swayamsewaks and even the Metei tribes of Manipur took an active part.⁸ This led to a change in the perception of people regarding

⁷ *Organiser*, September 4, 1950, p. 10.

⁸ *Interview* with Madhukar Limaye, op. cit.

Sangh activities in Assam. Previously identified as an organization primarily for the Bengalis and Marwaris, post 1977, when emergency ended, the Sangh found a solid ground of support among the Assamese, Manipuri and several other Hindu communities.

Major issues in Assam: Infiltration and Conversion

Speaking at a Rashtra Jagaran Shivir organised at Nalbari in Assam, in January 2005, Shri Mohan Bhagwat, an RSS Sarkaryavah, described *infiltration* and *conversion* as the two most dangerous threats in Assam. Drawing an analogy with the Tsunami, he said:

“The tidal waves of tsunami are a natural calamity and no one knows when they would strike. But we are all aware that infiltration and conversion have been going on under a planned manner. Its outcome will be more dangerous than that of tsunami. The 2001 census has just indicated to the coming disaster.”⁹

This in short, sums up the main agenda of the RSS in Assam. As mentioned before, Hindutva aims at creating a polarized society based on the concept of the “other” and “social exclusionism”.¹⁰ The construction of a Hindu identity is therefore a process of inclusion and exclusion of values and symbols defining ‘we’ and ‘others’. The ‘others’ in Assam comprise both the Muslims and the Christians, with the two major issues of infiltration and conversion, revolving around them respectively, which are used as tools by the RSS for mobilizing the Hindus in this region.

Infiltration: RSS Mobilization against Muslims

The most important agenda of the RSS in the Northeast, particularly in Assam has and continues to be the immigration problem. This phenomenon has generated a host of accompanying political, social, economic, ethnic, and communal tensions in the region. In fact the question of migration and rightful citizenship has become the pivot around which Assam’s entire politics has come to revolve, and on which elections are won and lost.¹¹

⁹ *Sangh Samachar*, Organiser, January 23, 2005.

¹⁰ C.P. Bhambri, *Hindutva: A Challenge to Multicultural Democracy* (Delhi: Shipra, 2003), p.5.

¹¹ Archana Upadhyay, ‘Assam: The Infiltrator Issue’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 9, 2005, p.3002.

For an organization like the RSS which thrives on creating the Muslim as an ‘other’, the infiltration problem in Assam provides a perfect setting for its growth. Movement of people from East Bengal, later Pakistan and then Bangladesh, to different parts of the Northeast India, particularly in the twentieth century, provided the RSS enough fodder to consolidate their grounding in Assam. Time and again they stressed on the infiltration problem, claiming that it was leading to serious demographic changes in the state and urged the people to check this influx and prevent Assam from becoming a Muslim dominated region. The main argument employed to support the above stand was that the Hindus would soon become outnumbered in their own state by the “Pakistani infiltrators”.

The problem of infiltration persisted right up to the early 1950s, when hundreds of pre-Independence Muslim settlers from East Bengal were pushed back into what became known as East Pakistan. However the lure of land continued to attract migrants from that country. But they were now known as ‘Pakistani infiltrators’. Since there was neither any natural barrier nor any strict policing over large stretches of the border, many poverty-stricken, land hungry peasants or poor agricultural labourers continued to cross over. It soon became a problem to sort out genuine pre- Independence migrants from later ‘infiltrators’.

An *Organiser* report stating the initial impressions acquired by an RSS activist, Vasudeva during this period, was as follows:

“... I have come across people who, because they think they are not Aryans do not hesitate to denounce the whole country and conceive of Assam as a completely separate country. Little wonder Pakistanis lose no opportunity to encourage this ignorant provincialism. Some others think in terms of a Bengali nation. It is a sad spectacle of people groping in the dark. Over five lac hostile aliens quietly walking into the country was possible only in Assam.”¹²

After his first visit to Assam in 1950-51, Golwalkar wrote in detail to the Prime Minister about the continuing flow into Assam of the East Pakistani Muslims and the increasing dangers it posed. In 1964-65, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh took the lead in forming an

¹² Vasudeva, “In Assam”, in *Organiser*, April 24, 1950.

influential anti-infiltration committee. Right from the early 1960s, *Alok*, an Assamese weekly run by swayamsewaks, played a notable role in alerting the people of Assam about the growing volume of infiltration and the disastrous consequences flowing out of it.

In the words of Chhatradhikar Sri Gadmuria Goswami Dev, “after the partition the shadow over Assam has become still darkest and there is a deep conspiracy being hatched to annex the province to Pakistan. Even since long before the creation of Pakistan, from 1909- 1910, efforts are being made to turn Assam into a Muslim- majority province.”¹³

Diverting Anti- Bengali Sentiment to Anti- Muslim:

“The grand narrative of Hindu and Muslim strife that is part of Indian history cannot be applied to Assam, at least not yet.”

- Yasmin Saikia, 2005¹⁴.

If this proposition stands true, then one becomes curious about the existence of a Hindu nationalist presence in the state of Assam. Marred by ethnic and linguistic problems, Assam is one those few states in India, where religious divides have still not become actively operative. This was largely due to the Assamese- Bengali contradictions which overshadowed the mindset of the natives there; so much so, that other identities like that of religion got submerged within these existing categories.

The communal question in Assam has some specific dimensions in this region, which the RSS has been exploiting rather skillfully over the last few years. Communalism here, is not related to merely the ‘historic’ antagonism between Hindus and Muslims, because, it also has a linguistic dimension in Assam, including the question of land, immigration etc.¹⁵With the Bangladeshis being the main enemy of the Assamese today, Hindutva finds enough fodder to fan its agenda in Assam. Though it would be incorrect to say already that the Assamese and the RSS agenda have become one and the same in Assam, one also

¹³ Goswami Dev Gadmuria, “The People of Assam Their Plights and its Remedy”, *Organiser*, June 19, 1950.

¹⁴ Yasmin Saikia, *Assam and India: Fragmented Memories, Cultural Identity and the Tai- Ahom Struggle* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005) p. 66

¹⁵ M. S. Prabhakara, ‘BJP and the North –East’, in Praful Bidwai, Harbans Mukhia & Achin Vanaik (ed.) *Religion, Religiosity and Communalism*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996) p.207.

cannot ignore the fact that Hindu nationalism has gained much in the state, at least electorally in the last decade, owing to its anti- Bangladeshi stance.

It is important to note here that the anti- immigrant sentiment in Assam was essentially anti- Bengali. This was because, most migrants came from Bengal, including what is now Bangladesh (known as East Bengal before the 1947 partition and East Pakistan from 1947-71). Bengali migrants were both Hindus and Muslims. As discussed in the previous chapter, Bengali Hindus started arriving after the British created tea plantations in the middle of the nineteenth century. Because of their educational advantage over Assamese, they were better suited to man the growing administrative and professional machinery. Overall Bengali dominance began to manifest itself in various ways. They held urban professions, their language was more developed and widely used in Assam, and their educational and even numerical superiority became more than evident.¹⁶ As Homen Borgohain observes:

“The problem of outsiders for many of the Assamese is the problem of Bengali Hindus. Because they believe that it is only from them that the danger to their culture could come.”¹⁷

The Bengali Muslim immigrants, on the other hand were mostly peasants. They came predominantly from East Bengal (which later became Bangladesh); a highly populated area with low agricultural productivity and a fragmented landholding pattern incapable of supporting large families. In contrast, Assam was less populated, many areas were unsettled, and there was less pressure on the land. Bengali peasants made large tracts of waste flooded and forested land habitable and productive along the southern bank of the Brahmaputra river, and settled down there in the course of time. The Muslim immigrants have returned Assamese as their mother tongue in consecutive census operations conducted in the state especially since Independence.

¹⁶ Ashutosh Varshney, ‘Ethnic and Religious Conflicts in India’, *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Issue 7.3, September 30, 1983.

¹⁷ Homen Borgohain, *Bahirgatar Samasya* (in Assamese) [The Problem of Outsiders] (Guwahati: Kamal Malakar, 1979), p.24, as cited in Samir Kumar Das, ‘Ethnicity and the Rise of Religious Radicalism: The Security Scenario in Contemporary Northeast India’ in http://72.14.235.104/custom?q=cache:RvEOguC_An8J:www.apcss.org/Publications as viewed on July 30, 2006.

With the halting spread of education in the twentieth century, the Assamese middle class slowly emerged, and with the growth of the Assamese middle class, the seeds of “Assamese nationalism” were sown in Assam.¹⁸ After the partition of 1947 and the transfer of a very large Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet to East Pakistan, the Assamese middle class came to power for the first time in about a century. Through expanded educational programs and the use of Assamese as a language in the university, this newly acquired power, electorally buttressed, was used to consolidate the position of the Assamese middle class against Bengali dominance in administrative services and professions. The matter was further complicated by the enthusiastic support of both earlier and later Muslim migrants to projects of Assamese nationalism marked by tumultuous mass- movements to establish Assamese hegemony.¹⁹

What the RSS tried to do, and succeeded a great deal too in doing that, was to twist the Assamese- Bengali cleavage into a Hindu- Muslim cleavage. The RSS made a clear division between “infiltrators” and “refugees”. The Bengali Muslims , it claimed, were ‘infiltrators’, because their place of origin, post 1947, makes them "aliens"; and their migration, for political purposes, can therefore be called “illegal.” The Hindu migrants on the other hand were “refugees”, who had been driven out of East Pakistan after Partition by the Muslims.²⁰ In fact the RSS expressed sympathy towards these people and urged the government time and again to address their problems.

An *Organiser* report even stated, that it was pathetic to see ‘one’s own people’ treated like street beggars for no fault of their own.²¹ Similarly, Sri Eknath Ranade (RSS organizer for the eastern zone, June, 1950) in an interview to the correspondent of the daily ‘Bharat’ of Poona (June 19, 1950), highlighted the problem of Bengali Hindus, saying that “in Assam the problem is the result of provincial narrowness. Bengali refugees are not welcome in Assam because of provincialism...people looked at them as

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Udayon Misra, ‘Identity Transformation and the Assamese Community: Illusion and the Reality’, in Kailash S. Aggarwal (ed.), *Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in Northeast India* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1999), pp. 107-108.

²⁰ Infiltrators and Refugees cant be put on par, says Balasaheb Deoras: *Organiser*, April 20, 1980, p. 7.

²¹ Banerji Shibdas, “ Guwahati is Dream like”, in *Organiser*, May 29, 1950.

outsiders and felt that they should be driven out". In fact the RSS activists also provided relief work to these Hindu refugees through their organization called the *Bastuhara Sahayta Samiti*. This organization fed and provided clothes to almost 500- 700 refugees from East Pakistan daily.²²

Balasaheb Deoras declared that the Hindus who were streaming into Assam were 'refugees', being hounded out by the Bangladeshi Islamic regime; and Bharat was under a moral obligation to give refuge and protection to them. On the other hand, the Bangladeshi Muslims whose influx into Assam is being engineered by the Bangladeshi regime in pursuance of the decades old design of converting it into Islamic Assam, are 'infiltrators'. Balasaheb also warned the Assamese Hindus of the dreadful fate awaiting any part of the country that would be reduced to a Hindu-minority area. History bears witness to the fact that all such parts had been cut asunder from the motherland and the Hindus there liquidated. Balasaheb emphasized in all his public speeches—more so in Assam—the paramount need for maintaining Assam a predominantly Hindu province.²³

Demographic Changes: Unfounded?

Even after independence, immigration from erstwhile East Pakistan continued unabated, with the support of certain political parties who used these illegal migrants as vote-banks. These early illegal migrants from East-Pakistan identified themselves as Assamese at the time of the census and continued to increase their population in the decades that followed. In fact the period 1951- 1971 is marked by significant increases in the growth rate of population. In 1951, the decadal increase in population was 19.94 which shot up to 34.97 in 1961 and 34.95 in 1971. The corresponding all- India figures for these years are 13.31, 21.64 and 24.80 respectively.²⁴ Further it may be noted that in the wake of the Bangladesh war of 1971-72, several lakhs of Bengali immigrants poured into Assam, but after the war was over, only a few of them returned home. How many Bengalis entered and remained in Assam after the 1971 Pakistani civil war and the 1972 war between India

²² *Organiser*, 1 May, 1950.

²³ <http://www.hindubooks.org>, visited on 5th July, 2007.

²⁴ *Economic Survey in Assam*, 1972. Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam. (as cited in Girin Phukan, *Ethnicisation of Politics in Northeast India*, (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers., 2003) p 90.,

and Pakistan is unknown. According to government estimates the population of Assam increased from 14.6 million in 1971 to 19.9 million in 1981, or 5.3 million.²⁵

Myron Weiner points out that had Assam's population increased at the all- India rate of 24.7 percent the population increase would have been 3.6 million. Moreover, according to the Sample Registration of the Government of India, the natural population increase of Assam was 0.5 percent less than the all- India figures in 1970- 72 and 1.2 percent less in 1976-78. On the basis of these figures we can estimate that the immigration into Assam from 1971 to 1981 was on the order of 1.8 million.²⁶ Also, in Assam, the percentage share of Hindus in total population has come down from 72.51 in 1971 to 67.13 per cent in 1991, while that of Muslims and Christians has increased from 24.56 and 2.61 in 1971 to 28.43 and 3.32 per cent in 1991 respectively. While the high growth rate of Christians in the state (95.37 per cent) during 1971- 91 might have been contributed, to some extent, by conversion, the high growth rate of Muslims (77.42 per cent) is attributed to migration of Muslim population from Bangladesh.

According to the National Census of 2001, the Muslim population in the Northeast Indian State of Assam is 30.9 per cent out of a total of 26.6 million. Although the last Census was conducted three years ago, it was only on September 6, 2004, that the office of the Registrar General of India, which carries out census operations, released the statistical break-up on religious lines. The latest figures demonstrate that the proportionate growth of the Muslim population in Assam, in comparison with other religious communities, is second only to Jammu and Kashmir (67 per cent Muslims). The Census puts Assam's population at 26,655,528. Of this, 17,296,455 were recorded as Hindus and 8,240,611 Muslims. Among the critical elements made public by the Census authorities is the fact that six of Assam's 27 districts have a majority Muslim population. The district of Barpeta tops the list with 977,943 Muslims and 662,066 Hindus. The other five districts where Muslims constitute a majority: Dhubri, Goalpara, Nagaon, Karimganj and

²⁵ Visaria and Visaria, cited in note 6, pp.10-13. since the census was not conducted in Assam in 1981, these figures are estimates, cited in Myron Weiner, 'the Political Demography of Assam's Anti- Immigrant Movement', p. 286

²⁶ Myron Weiner 'The Political Demography of Assam's Anti- Immigrant Movement, *Population and Development Review* 9, No. 2. , June 1983, p. 286.

Hailakandi. The census data according to religion that was released in New Delhi on September 6, 2004, by Professor Ashish Bose, one of India's foremost demographers, puts the Muslim percentage at 31 % in Assam.²⁷

Over the years, the RSS' main strategy in Assam, has been to create a fear among the Assamese community with the help of demographic exaggerations, regarding the rise in Muslim population. The main issue that stirred popular sentiment in this region was the so-called threat of the "extinction of the Assamese identity". The Assamese Hindus who happen to be the dominant group in the Brahmaputra valley feel that the large number of infiltrators has threatened to impair the demographic balance of the state, and upset the socio-cultural equilibrium even to the extent of obliterating the identity of the local people. It is assumed that the Bengali immigrants constitute one of the important vote-banks in the state and thus it determines the trend of Assam politics. A section of the dominant Assamese elite even fear that if the numerical strength of the Muslim immigrants goes on increasing, a day may come when they might demand Assam's secession from India. Some suspect that Bangladesh has deliberately been conspiring to send large number of people in order to change the communal ratio in the state in the hope of justifying the annexation of Assam by Bangladesh.

By instilling this fear psychosis, the RSS constantly acts on instigating the Hindus to drive out the Muslims. However, it must be noted that, though sometimes blown out of proportion, the demographic changes in Assam are not entirely a figment of imagination of the Sangh Parivar, but have a certain element of truth.

Assam Movement and the RSS

The rhetoric of a threatening Muslim/ Bengali community that was likely to become a majority group in Assam whipped up sentiment and directed political action throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the problem of Bengali Muslim settlement in Assam became crucial to the Assamese identity movement. In 1979, the All Assam Student Union (AASU) started the anti-foreigners movement to detect, delete and

²⁷ Amberish K. Diwanji, www.rediff.com/news/2004/sep, September 17, 2004.

deport illegal migrants of Bangladesh from Assam, which culminated with the Nellie massacre of 1983. True to its communal nature, the RSS- BJP supported the Assam movement led by the AASU and the AAGSP. All political parties except the erstwhile Jan Sangh now the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), termed the movement as anti-social and anti-national with parochial and communal overtones. Besides the BJP on the national level, the RSS also grabbed on the opportunity and mobilized its cadres to make the Indian public aware of the 'true nature of the AASU's anti-foreigners movement' and the 'dangers the illegal infiltration from Bangladesh posed for national security.'²⁸ They also raised the demand that all Muslims who had then entered Assam from the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) must be identified and deported.²⁹

Shekhar Gupta an eminent journalist, had pointed out then, "...thanks to the lack of political pragmatism among the AASU leadership, the RSS elements have been able to operate at a different and more political level, succeeding in solely influencing some of the leaders in mofussil towns. These can be made to play a key role in whatever future scheme of things the RSS has for Assam and Northeast. The AASU leadership, jolted by Muslim revolt within its own ranks, has failed to check this drift and, if it continues, in five years from now (1984) the RSS in Assam will have the clout to do the kind of stuff it has been credited with during February 1983."³⁰

The IMDT Act:

Following the Assam Movement, and the massacre at Nellie (discussed in the previous chapter), the Parliament enacted the controversial Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) (IMDT) Act in 1983, which as the title suggests, provided for judicial tribunals to determine disputes about citizenship which might arise under the Foreigner's Act. The IMDT Act enacted by the Parliament to detect and deport illegal migrants from Assam is a legislation that has a direct bearing on the issue of illegal migration. Under the Act, the onus of establishing nationality rests not on the illegal migrant, not even on the

²⁸ *Organiser*, February 26, 2006, p. 6.

²⁹ 'The BJP Gameplan in the North- East', www.cpiml.org, site visited on February 14, 2006.

³⁰ Shekhar Gupta, *Assam – A Divided Valley*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1984), p.122.

government, but on the private individual who must pay a fee to lodge a complaint and do so under a stipulated jurisdiction.³¹ The act is viewed to be strongly discriminatory as Assam is the only state which has this law, whereas the rest of the country still follows the Foreigners Act of 1946.³²

Though the Act was itself for the entire country, it was initially made applicable only to Assam and was to be made applicable to other parts of the country whenever the government notified it for those parts. However, from the beginning there were bitter complaints from Assamese lawyers that the cumbersome provisions of the Act did more to protect the illegal migrants than detect and expel them. For example, the onus of detection was laid almost wholly on the shoulders of the ordinary citizen, and the tribunals merely provided legal form to the process. (Vide clauses 8-12 of the IMDT set of 1983). It need hardly be spelt out that an ordinary member of the public is hardly likely to busy himself with finding proof of foreign origin of any suspected infiltrator, as required under the act. Since then, the press witnessed a war of statements, with Assamese regionalist outfits demanding a repeal of the Act, and minority organisations and the Congress opposing that move. The government's statistics showed that in the 20 years of the operation of the IMDT Act, about 80% of the complaints were rejected by the screening committee itself. Out of the remaining 76,228 cases referred to the Tribunals during these years, only 21,169 were disposed off by the Tribunal 2003. Out of these, 11,636 persons were declared as illegal immigrants, but only 1517 could be physically expelled.³³

³¹ The rules under the Act provide for an administrative screening committee which would examine the complaints under the Act and reject complaints found to be frivolous. The Act, also for the first time, gave a limited right to any person to lodge a private complaint with the Tribunals under this Act against persons regarding whom they had information of their being foreigners. Such a right did not exist under the Foreigner's Act. The right was however limited by providing that such a complaint could only be made against a person residing within the same local area, and that persons could make a maximum of ten such complaints. The idea was to protect all migrants from before independence to the year 1971, and introduce legal and judicial mechanisms for the detection of foreigners who had crossed over after 1971.

³² Archana Upadhyay, 'Assam The Infiltrator Issue', *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 9, 2005, p. 3003.

³³ Prashant Bhushan, *Outlook*, August 3, 2005.

The political device of the IMDT Act thus accentuated the communal dimension to the real problem, and both the BJP and the *Sangh Parivar* have assumed a militant posture on the issue of repeal of the Act.³⁴ For the past two decades, the IMDT Act had provided enough fodder to the RSS/BJP protagonists to sow the seeds of communal discord in Assam and reap considerable electoral benefits.

Conversion: Mobilization against Christians

Other than the infiltration issue, another important agenda of the RSS in Assam has been the conversion of tribals into Christianity. Despite their obsession with Muslims, Christians have also been considered a threat by the RSS, thus acquiring the status of 'Enemy Number Two' in the Hindu nationalist discourse.³⁵ As Sumit Sarkar puts it, "the Sangh Parivar has always been seen to identify one or more enemy 'other' to consolidate into an aggressive bloc the 'Hindu community', which it claims to represent and seeks to constitute."³⁶ Soon after independence, Golwalkar targeted the Christian missionaries, criticizing them for their proselytizing activities, particularly in the tribal regions, and acting as the agents of a global conspiracy to evangelize India. He created the VHP and deputed pracharaks to tribal areas to counter them. Deoras similarly activated the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram to Hinduize the tribals and set up an alternate system of health and educational services in the tribal belts as was commonly provided by the Christian missionaries there. In several places, the VHP organized 're-conversion' (*paravatan*) of the Christians back to the Hindu fold. The RSS alleged that international Christian agencies were funding missionary activities and sending trained workers to India to exterminate Hinduism. These missionaries were also accused of dishonoring Hindu Gods and Goddesses and converting vulnerable tribals by treacherous means.³⁷

As early as June 19, 1950, a report in the *Organiser* stated that

³⁴ Hiren Gohain, 'Sangh Politics in Assam', in <http://www.sabrang.com/cc/archive/2003/july03/spreport3.html>, as viewed on January 2006.

³⁵ Pralay Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers 2003), p. 243.

³⁶ Sumit Sarkar, 'Conversions and Politics of Hindu Right', *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 26, 1999, p. 1691.

³⁷ *Organiser*, February 14, 1999.

“the tribals of Assam, who inhabit both the plains and the hills in the province, are day by day going away from the rest of the Assamese and it is feared that they may be lost to the province altogether.”

The RSS claims that in the ‘olden days’, the tribals (in Assam) were Hindus and even now many of them are Hindus, though their religious beliefs are primitive in character. While the Bhusai community has completely turned Christian, the Nagas, Garos and Khasis contain 20% Christians. The Mikir community chants Rama Nama, worship the Tulsi plant, considers itself as descendant of Hanuman, Sugriva and Bali and does not kill or eat cows. But even in this community, they claim, Christianity is spreading its net. The Mismis are fire worshippers and believers in the Hindu pantheon inspite of being beef-eaters. So is the case with Sarek, Sili and Galong communities whose Hinduism is animistic. The Abars do not eat beef, believe in the other world and worship Indra. The Anka, Uphla communities eat beef and yet have preserved Hinduism.³⁸

The RSS is of the view that these ‘simple mountain folk’ are slowly but steadily being turned by Christians against Hindus. The Christian missionaries they say, practically rule the Khasi and Jaintia hills. This has been achieved they argue, with sound planning and attracting the tribals through establishment of schools, hospitals and other basic amenities. However these missionary activities are not only limited to the hills of Assam but also in the plains, especially among the tea plantation labourers. In order to address these issues, the RSS had set up an organization called the ‘*Pahari Sewa Sangh*’ in the 1950s, for the economic, moral and social uplift of tribals. This body took particular care in arranging for essentials like clothes, rugs, salt and other such commodities. They emphasized a great deal on social contact, a classic illustration of which, is the musical programme of Kirtan in which all tribals were invited. Sangh activists also worked towards establishing small temples in as many places as possible, mending bad roads etc. Several RSS workers also stayed with the tribals, “in the very hills which have been their age long homes”, thus identifying themselves completely with the life and interests of the tribals. In the words of Goswami Dev, an experienced pracharak in this province “these simple- hearted mountain- folk were ours and they can be reclaimed if we make their hearts realize that we and they are parts of the same ancient Hindu nation and shall

³⁸ *Organiser*, June 19, 1950.

continue to remain so.”³⁹ The patronizing tendency of the RSS towards the tribals thus becomes evident from these words. There is a constant attempt at bringing the tribals ‘back’ to the Hindutva fold.⁴⁰ The activities of the *Pahari Sewa Sangh* are now being conducted by the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, which shall be discussed in detail shortly.

Sangh Parivar: Organisation and Programmes

The RSS:

Shaping the Organisation

Along with their daily activities, the RSS gradually started laying the foundation of the Sangh Parivar in Assam. According to an RSS office-bearer⁴¹, at present, in the northern and southern *prants*, except Mizoram and Nagaland, RSS shakhas are operative in all the districts. According to administrative organization, the two *prants* are divided into 16 *vibhags*, and instead of 42+1 districts now, there are 40+1 districts. Of 115 *tehsils*, 14 have been replaced. In total RSS, *shakhas* are running in 659 villages in the northeast. Total *upshakhas* in the morning are 374, 450 in the evening, and 5 at night. In addition to this, weekly meetings are constituted in 16 places, Sangh *mandalis* are formed in 13 places.

At an average 7 youth, and 9 children attend these *shakhas*. At present, the *pracharak* of North Assam is Manik Chandra Das and the *Sanghchalak* of the province is Dr Umesh Chakravarty, while the *Karyavah* is Dr Aseem Kr. Dutt. Southern Assam is headed by Gaurishankar Chakravarty, and Shankar Bhattacharya is the *Prant Karyavah*.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ On several occasions the Sangh activists have conducted ‘shuddhi’ and ‘.ghar vapsi’ ceremonies to reconvert the tribals into Hinduism.

⁴¹ Interview with Jai Kishan, office-bearer in Keshav Dham, Guwahati, 30th November.

⁴² Interview with Dayal Borah, (Senior Pracharak of RSS) Keshav Dham, Guwahati, Assam, November 30, 2006.

The Affiliates:

“Different kinds of activities are necessary for the all- round development of the country. The Sangh aims to cover all fields through its work. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad has its own distinct objectives – to bring all the Hindu sects into a common Hindu platform and to revive all the temples that were destroyed and ruined...The task of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad is to bring direction to the country’s youth. The Bharatiya Janata party is the political wing....Today there is a concerted effort to separate the vanavasi Samaj from the Hindu Samaj and make them think they are not Hindus. Our effort is to awaken the vanavasi regions and remove this feeling of difference. For this we have to unite the Vanavasis. That is the Akhil Bharatiya Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram’s work.”

Balasaheb Deshpande, *Sanstha, Shasan aur Karyakarta*. 1990:8-9.

The RSS started expanding rapidly in the 1970s, particularly, after Balasaheb Deoras became the ‘sarsanghchalak’.⁴³ The Assam unit also activated its affiliates; the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the Vidya Bharati, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), etc. The VKA and the BMS hardly had any presence in Assam. However, the ABVP was emerging as a promising affiliate, especially because of its participation in the AASU led Assam agitation.

The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP)

The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) is the student wing of the RSS. It conducts a wide range of programs that involve students in spreading the world view of the RSS. The ABVP is one of the most prominent affiliates of the RSS, which has always played an important role in Assam.

The beginning of ABVP activities in Assam may be traced back to October, 1965, when a few workers of the organization under the leadership of Shri Padmanabh Acharya came to the hilly regions of Assam to study tribal life. In the process they interacted with several tribal youth in Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh for almost

⁴³ For details on the Deoras strategy, see Pralay Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, op.cit., pp.178-223.

2 months. In the course of time the ABVP workers sensed a deep sense of alienation and suspicion among the tribal youth, with regard to the mainstream Indian people.⁴⁴ In an attempt to demolish this 'anti- Indian' feeling, an Inter-State living experience was devised for students. In 1966 a few students from the Northeast were selected for a 'Bharat Darshan'. The primary motive of this 'Students Experience in Inter- State Living'(SEIL) was to expose these tribal students to the mainstream Hindu 'samskaras', and formed a part of a long term strategy to integrate the tribals within the fold of Hindutva.

This programme proved fruitful, and the project therefore was formed into an association. Though SEIL claims to be a voluntary association for the youth in Northeast, it is primarily sponsored by the ABVP. In fact the memberships of the two organizations overlap. Students' Experience in Inter-State Living (SEIL) claims to be a movement for emotional integration, a movement to inculcate a feeling of oneness amongst the people residing in different parts of the country and to promote awareness about the dangers of 'divisive' and 'separatist forces' which seriously endanger National Integration.⁴⁵ In 2004, with the aim of establishing a permanent centre for the youth of Northeast, the ABVP set up a Yuva Vikas Kendra.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Interview with students in ABVP office, Barthakur Mill Road, Ulubari, Guwahati, Assam, December 2, 2006.

⁴⁵ SEIL pamphlet, 'Unity is Strength: India is One', 2007.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

SEIL activities at a glance:

Sl No.	Activities	No. of events	No.of Participants
1	Cultural Experience Tours	21	871
2	Fellowship camps	7	675
3	Personality development camps	1	35
4	Get together	3	140
5	National integration Conference	1	2000
6	On the spot Study tours	6	36
7	Screening of informative audio visuals	57	3000
8	Publications	1	

Source: SEIL pamphlet, 2007.

After its initial entry in the late 1960s, the ABVP made inroads into several colleges and universities in Assam, especially concentrated in the Cachar region. It thus had a considerable presence in G.C. College, Silchar, Karimganj College and Cachar College, which are strong Bengali domains. It however could not make any significant entry in the Brahmaputra valley, where the AASU held sway. The present situation too is very much the same.

The main agenda of the ABVP in Assam has been with regard to the immigration issue. It has been vociferously demanding the detection and deportation of the Bangladeshi immigrants along with the All Assam Students Union (AASU), giving a communal twist to the problem. It supported the AASU agitation in 1979, which advocated deleting a large number of Bangladeshi immigrants from the electoral rolls and deporting them on the grounds that they had illegally migrated to India. Anderson and Damle opine that the decision of the Vidyarthi Parishad to get involved in the 1979- 1986 Assamese agitation

was prompted by the fear that radical political groups might steer the agitation toward demanding an independent state.⁴⁷

The role of ABVP played an important role in highlighting the immigration problem of Assam. It demanded a thorough constituency-wise checking and deletion of names of foreigners from the electoral rolls and, in 1981, submitted a memorandum to that effect to Shakhdar, the Election Commissioner. Its campaign of 'Save Assam today to save India tomorrow', launched on 15th August 1983, drew the desired response from all over the country. Top leaders of political parties, eminent journalists and Sarvodaya leaders from Assam and Bengal demanded with one voice the holding of tripartite talks between the leaders of the AASU, the Government and the opposition parties to solve the problem. It demanded the detection of foreigners, deletion of their names from the electoral rolls and their deportation on the basis of the 1961 Census, and also the publication of National Register of Citizens of 1951. This was followed by a fortnight-long countrywide 'Save Assam' campaign involving over 250 district conventions.

The organization alleges that the Congress and its allies have overlooked national interest and taken a 'soft stand' with regard to Bangladeshi infiltrators, to protect their vote banks.⁴⁸ Quoting a statement made by the Governor of Assam, S.K. Sinha, the ABVP was reported to have said that on an average 6,000 Bangladeshis infiltrate into Assam everyday. They also alleged that these infiltrators have been indulging in anti-social activities disturbing peace and normal life in many parts of Assam.⁴⁹ Apart from this, the Vidyarthi Parishad in Assam has voiced its concern over the weak fencing on the Indo Bangladesh border. In fact from January 1 to 10th, a total of 64 ABVP workers from 22 states conducted a survey of the international border in the northeast.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Anderson and Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The RSS and Hindu Revivalism* (Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1987) p. 123.

⁴⁸ *The Hindu*, January 25, 2006.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *Bharat Bangladesh Seema Sarvekshan-2007*, (Mumbai: ABVP Office Central Publication, 2007).

The team in its reports claimed that there are areas under Dhubri (Assam district), in parts of Barak Valley, from Katigara sector to Sadirkal, Chandighat, Jalalpur sector, Bhanga region etc. where there is no fencing up to several kms. The fencing at Rustam border and out posts from Pillar No. 1015 to 1018 and 1030 is completely open, it claims. Further, the report points out that a large number of villages in the borders of Assam, like Hailakandi, Karimganj, Dhubri etc, have already become Muslim dominated. The team further claims that insidious crimes like smuggling of arms and ammunition (in Berbhang, Bhringpan, Paksarkuti, Tistapara, Manakchar etc in Assam), the kidnap and rape of Hindu women, fake currency rackets (in Barak valley, Nalia in Dhubri in Assam.) etc are taking place unchecked in these border areas. It also outlined problems like smuggling of cattle especially cows, across the border, the growing number of mosques and *madrassas* which are supposedly the breeding places for terrorists, demolition of Hindu temples in several places and forcible occupation of 'Hindu' lands by the 'mullahs'.

On the basis of their findings, the ABVP demanded that the fencing of the border should be completed and electrified. Further that the BSF personnel be armed with adequate 'orders like shoot- at- sight'. It also called for the intelligence system to be strengthened and all patronage being provided to the infiltrators to be done away with. Moreover, a five member delegation of ABVP from Assam also visited Delhi to try and convince Ministers and MPs about the problem and persuade them to act accordingly. There has been considerable evidence to prove the presence of an ISI nexus in this region. According to General Officer Commanding of the 4 Corps based in Tezpur, Lt. General Mahesh Vij reportedly said in an interview in October 2000 that a number of *madrassas* in Assam are suspected to be receiving assistance, financial or otherwise, from the Pakistani Inter Services intelligence (ISI). He added that the number of *madrassas* has increased considerably in the Indo Bangladesh borders, and some of them are suspected to be used by the ISI to indoctrinate young impressionable minds for future terrorists action.⁵¹

⁵¹ Nitin Gogoi, 'ISI aiding *Madrassas* in the NE', www.rediffonnet.com, (October 28, 2000) as viewed on February 2006.

However, it is interesting to note how the ABVP manipulates these facts to suit its own political interests and further its strategy of polarizing the Hindus and the Muslims in the region. The report prepared by them, therefore, is typically characteristic of the RSS ideology in both style and content. Rather than a national security problem, the entire issue of infiltration and fencing has been treated as a threat to the Hindus, from the Muslims. This has been done deliberately in order to arouse the Hindus 'from their slumber' and act fast to drive out the 'enemy' Muslim.

Vidya Bharati (VB):

Created by the RSS in 1977, the Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan is the umbrella organization for all educational institutions run by the Sangh.⁵² The Vidya Bharati network focuses on moral, extracurricular and physical education for 'mind, body and spirit'.⁵³ Ever since its inception, the growth of Vidya Bharati has been phenomenal. In 1977, it managed only 500 schools and just over 20,000 students; by the end of 1990, the number of these schools reached 4,000 having 35,000 teachers.⁵⁴ By 1998 it came to be regarded as the largest NGO in education, running 13,000 institutions which employ 74,000 teachers and educate 17 lakh students. By 1999, the organization expanded further, it now runs 14,000 schools having 18 lakh pupils. These schools are popularly known as Saraswati Shishu Mandir; but in certain places they are also run in the names of Bharatiya Vidya Niketan, Gita Vidyalaya and Saraswati Bal Vidyalaya.⁵⁵

The Shishu Shiksha Samiti in Assam was established in 1979 under the presidentship of late Acharya Rajani Kanta Deva Sharma. The first school under this Samiti, the Sankardev Shishu Kunja, was started on the occasion of the *tithi* of Sankardev in that very year at Ambikagiri nagar, Guwahati. The name and the occasion were both carefully chosen (Sankardev, being a household name) in order to attract a large number of

⁵² Organiser, November 12, 1978.

⁵³ Angana Chatterjee, 'Learning in Saffron: RSS schools in Orissa', www.dissidentvoice.org, as viewed on March 21, 2006.

⁵⁴ Organiser, October 21 1990.

⁵⁵ Pralay Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst With Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan*, op. cit, pp. 159-60.

Assamese students. Moreover, the medium of instruction being Assamese in these schools, added to its popularity. In Bengali dominated regions however, like the Borak valley region for instance, the medium of instruction is Bengali. In Bodo dominated districts the medium again is Bodo. Most of the *acharyas* though hailing from Maharashtra are fluent in these local languages, thus establishing a firm grounding for their activities.

At the start, Shishu Shiksha Samiti, Assam used to administer the functions of its schools in the entire Northeast region. With the increase in the number of school and expansion of activities, separate state wise *samitis* were established. An interview with the Organizing Secretary of Vidya Bharati, Brahmaji Rao revealed that in 1996, when he had arrived in northeast, there were only 156 schools, now there are 402 schools in the Brahmaputra valley; 3 in English medium, 2 in Bodo medium and 396 in Assamese. In Borak valley there are 40 schools which are Bengali medium.⁵⁶ He further gave the following details:

There are 2 main categories of schools:

1. schools with fees ranging from Rs. 30- 270.
2. schools without fees, mainly in the rural areas.

In Halflong there are 2 such schools in Hindi medium which are residential.

Affiliated to the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA), the medium of instruction in most places is Assamese while in the tribal belts, it is English. However 3 languages are compulsory in all these schools, English and Hindi are taught from class I and Sanskrit from class II. 28 schools in the northeast have hostels, the rest are all day schools. There are total 68 state and 8 *samities* in the northeast of which the Shishu Shiksha Samiti and the Shiksha Vikas Parishad are prominent.

⁵⁶ Interview with Brahmaji Rao, (Organizing Secretary, Vidya Bharati, North East), Vidya Bharati office, Prasanta Path, December 1, 2006.

The present position of the schools, number of students and teachers are as follows.

Samiti	Primary	M.E.	Secondary	Single teacher	Total	Acharya	Students
Purvottar Janjati S.S.	-	-	-	180	180	180	5,400
Brahmaputra valley	204	124	74	-	402	3,649	61,353
Borak valley	27	5	3	5	40	250	3,248
Arunachal	1	8	-	-	9	95	1,658
Meghalaya	8	4	1	-	13	59	993
Manipur	2	5	5	-	12	181	2,783
Tripura	2	-	-	1	3	15	150
Nagaland	3	-	-	-	3	15	215
Mizoram	-	2	-	-	2	22	260
	214	148	83	186	631	4,466	76,060

(Source: Annual Report, 2006, Shishu Shiksha Samiti, Guwahati office, Assam)

Like all other *shishu mandirs*, the content of education is almost the same in these schools too. The vigorous assertion of Sanskrit literature, science, geography, and history in particular form very important parts of the curriculum. But these are all interpreted in terms of Hindutva's understanding of the same. The texts written in Assamese, weave disparaging and malevolent fictions about minority groups, inciting Hindus to take revenge. Vedic mathematics, introduced recently by Vidya Bharati in these schools also forms an important part of the curriculum now.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ From time to time, the Vidya Bharati conducts several programmes to indoctrinate the students in their line of thought. From Sept 4th to 12th, 2006 for instance, it organised a Vedic Mathematics training class at Hojai in Assam. The participants were 70 in number and were selected out of mathematics teachers of 283 schools run by Vidya Bharati chapter of Assam. The course covered included Mitra, Number System, Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication, Divison, Square, cube and divisibility using VM methods. It was conducted under Dr. D.P.Verma of Patna assisted by Sri Devendra Rao Deshmukh of Bhopal and Sri Ram Chandra Arya of Patna. (See <http://www.sacredscience.com>)

The RSS has been consistently disseminating 'sanskar and sanskriti' through the teachers of these schools. Most of these acharyas are swayamsevaks themselves, well trained in the ideology of Hindu Rashtra. A periodic examination called Sanskrit Gyan Pariksha is conducted among the students belonging to class iv to xii to assess their knowledge on Indian culture and history. With regard to the daily routine of classes, Brahmaji admitted that the day begins with Saraswati Bandana, Omar, Shanti path, Gayatri Mantra etc. Moreover, students also sing Borgeet(traditional devotional songs of Assam), Vande Mataram, and recite the Bhagwad Gita everyday. Jana Gana Mana is sung on occasions. In his words "we are trying to instill in the students, a sense of patriotism and love for their state Assam, as well as their nation, Bharat." The children sing the prayers and songs steeped in devotion to the Hindu Rashtra.

Another related organisation which plays an active role in Assam is the Shikshan Mandal. The RSS had in 1969 formed the Bharatiya Shikshan Mandal (BSM), essentially an organisation of teachers belonging to the RSS, which focussed its attention on evolving a "Hindutva curriculum". Though mainly an educational body, Shikshan Mandal in Assam, runs several projects like orphanages, old age homes, Sanskrit *gyan* centres etc. It is interesting to note here that this organisation has eminent academicians from Gauhati University (particularly History, Assamese literature and Sanskrit), Asom Sahitya Sabha members and journalists, as its associates. In the garb of doing social work, these people are often unknowingly made a part of the larger Hindutva project, in spreading 'awareness about Hindu dharma, sahitya, and sanskars'.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Field Notes, December, 2006.

Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was established by Golwalkar in 1964 to address the problem of untouchability in the Hindu society. Its Assam branch was established in Guwahati in 1966, in a period of 3 months by Dadasaheb Aptekar . The first Adhikari in charge was Hemchandra Dev Goswami. Pandit Tirthanath Sharma, a college principal was also one of its principal founders.⁵⁹

The VHP's activities started with organizing *sammelans* (conference) in the northeast. These *sammelans* proved to be very beneficial for the organisation and its popularity among the Hindus shot up instantly. Since Christianity had spread in several parts of the northeast, the Parishad took upon itself the task of making the Hindus aware of this and uniting them. At the first VHP Conference of that region held at Guwahati in 1967, a good number of '*janajati*' delegates were invited from Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland. In this conference every '*vanavasi*' delegate was presented with a locket of 'OM symbol'⁶⁰ by Shri Vishweshwara Tirtha of Pejawar Math.

The question at hand was, how could the *janajatis* be considered as Hindus, accustomed as they were to beef-eating? Speaking to Shri Shankaracharya of Dwaraka Peetha and other prominent *sattradhikars*⁶¹ of different Vaishnav Sattras of Assam present at the Conference, Golwalkar convinced them that the '*janajatis*', who have been basically Hindus all along, had been deprived of the benefit of proper Hindu religious enlightenment for a long time because of lack of communication and contacts with the rest of the society and its culture. As such, it was no fault of theirs if they had remained alienated from our religious and cultural concepts such as devotion to cow. It was therefore our duty to accept the *janajatis* as part of the Hindu society without any hesitation.

⁵⁹ Interview with Madhvaji, (Organizing Secretary, VHP, Assam), VHP office, Uzan Bazar, Guwahati, Assam, December 4, 2006.

⁶⁰ Hindu religious symbol.

⁶¹ Vaishnav religious leaders, heading Sattras, a Hindu religious institution famous in Assam.

Following him, the Shankaracharya of Dwarka declared that the *janajatis* are Hindus and their eating beef had been out of sheer economic necessity as there was no other cheap food available to them in the deep interiors of those hilly regions. The Acharya added that it was rather the fault of the so-called culturally advanced people that they had not cared to go to those hilly areas and educate the people about the Hindu culture and heritage all these years. To prove this further, Golwalkar shared his meal with the *janajati* leaders present there. He also called for all the unity of all Hindus urging the *sattradhikars* to strengthen contacts between each other and the other Hindu leaders in general.⁶² In 1982, the Parishad again organized the “Purvanchal Hindu *sammelan*”, on the lines of the 1967 *sammelan*, where 8000 Hindus, Savarna *janajati*, Purohati, Nagarani, *sadhus* and *sanyasis* from all over the region participated actively.

The proceedings of the *sammelan* are a pointer to the fact as to how the Sangh amalgamates and adjusts to local traditions to spearhead the Hindutva brigade. The flexibility with regard to beef eating, the association with *sattradhikaris* etc., prove its strategy of co-opting with the regional traditions. In fact the *sattras* today have become important centres for the dissemination of Hindutva ideals, in Assam. Further, as the organizing secretary, VHP, Assam, Madhavji states that “we have adjusted to the needs and demands of the region, like learning the language, establishing door to door contact with the people etc. People have now complete trust on us and have actively started donating for the Parishad’s activities. They have started singing “Vande Mataram” and “Jana gana mana”. The VHP also introduced several north Indian Hindu rituals in the religious culture of Assam. The Parishad’s main festival, “Janmastami” is being celebrated in Guwahati over few years now, which was traditionally not a part of the Assamese culture.

The VHP’s activities began in the form of social work in the interior villages of Assam.. By 1969, the Parishad became active in 42- 45 villages, establishing hostels for tribal students, homeopathic clinics, dispensaries etc. and arranging doctors for the treatment of people. It also set up a series of Ekal Vidyalayas (Single School Teachers) to indoctrinate

⁶² www.hindubooks.org , viewed on July 12, 2007.

students in remote villages with 'Hindu *samskars*'. Besides these, the Parishad also took part actively in relief activities during floods, by providing food, clothes etc. to the affected.⁶³ The VHP, in its initial years in Assam, based itself in a small town named Halflong, where a residential school along with a hostel comprising 60 students was established. With the "Hindu mission", in Halflong claims Madhavji, the "evil influence of Christianity" was arrested considerably. The Pracharak further added that he took great pains in traveling into the interior regions of Assam, sometimes on his bicycle and often on foot, to spread the word of Hindutva. Even now, the Parishad involves itself in local issues. For instance, during the Karbi Dimasa conflict, the Parishad played an active role in providing relief to the people. However, the VHP is also alleged to have communalized on the Karbi Dimasa conflict, for having blamed the conflict squarely on the Christian missionaries.⁶⁴

At present their work in Assam is divided among 31 *zilas* in the Uttar *prant*. It manages 12 hostels for the tribal students in Assam. The prominent hostels include the following:

- Sewa Sanskar Prakalpa Halflong, Assam
- Rongbong Sewa Ashram, Phulani, Assam
- Ransini Sewa Ashram, Berthal, Assam⁶⁵

In 1986, VHP organized the "Ekatmata yatra" where a "rathayatra" was carried out in entire India. During the Ramjanambhoomi Andolan movement, people donated Re. 1 and 25p (the cost of one brick), from every household of the northeastern villages. 22,040 villages in Assam participated in the Shilapujan.

The Parishad like all the other Sangh outfits has also been vocal about the infiltration problem in Assam. With a view to uniting all sections of Hindus and to strengthen the spirit of consolidation among them, a series of 27 Hindu conferences was organised by the VHP alone from time to time, throughout Assam and other States in the North-East. A sustained pamphleteering campaign was undertaken to educate the Hindu masses,

⁶³ Sangh Samachar 'One thousand teams of Sangh Swayamsevak engaged in flood relief', *Organiser*, August 22, 2004, p. 20

⁶⁴ <http://www.e-pao.net>, visited on July 8, 2007.

⁶⁵ www.vhp.org, visited on July 8, 2007.

especially in the rural areas, about the Muslim designs and how they have to face it unitedly.

In February, 2003, the VHP senior Vice President, Acharya Giriraj Kishore said in Silchar, Assam, that his organisation would launch a campaign to push back identified infiltrators into Bangladesh.⁶⁶ In November 2005, again, the VHP decided to form an outfit called the 'Hindu Sena'(Hindu soldiers), in order to "protect the interest of the indigenous communities in the state". According to the Parishad's leaders, it had become necessary to launch such a body, as the government had failed to protect the indigenous people from the growing activities of Pakistan's ISI.⁶⁷

Akhil Bharatiya Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA)

Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram was founded by R.K. Deshpande, a senior RSS *karyakarta*, and M.H. Ketkar, in 1952 at Jashpurnagar, now in Chattisgarh. A middle school and a boys hostel were started in the beginning. From 1977 ABVKA became an all India social organization and its activities spread throughout India in all the tribal belts, through its affiliated societies and organizations. Today the VKA claims to have over 10,000 projects including satsang kendras and lok kala mandals, schools, ekal vidyalayas, bal sanskar kendras, libraries, dispensaries, hospitals, agricultural development and vocational training centres, sports centres and contacts with over 35,000 tribal villages.

The Kalyan Ashram, Assam, was set up in 1978. The initial activities centred on establishment of hostels and medical dispensaries in places like Udalgiri, Diphu, Mayabagh, North Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. At present, the VKA runs almost 508 projects in the Northeast, including 24 hostels, 6 dispensaries, 116 sanskar kendras, 21 schools and 87 balwadis, covering over 417 places. Apart from this, the Kalyan ashram workers

⁶⁶ *The Telegraph* (Calcutta), February, 03, 2003.

⁶⁷ *The Hindustan Times*, November 11, 2005.

lay primary emphasis in building personal door to door contacts with the *janjatis*.⁶⁸ There are a total number of 161 male and 70 female full timers working for the Assam Kalyan Ashram.

VKA work at a glance (01.07.2006)

ACTIVITIES OF VKA		ASSAM
Districts with work	Total Vanavasi Khand	221
	Vikas Khand with work	58
Total Vanavasi villages		10,000
Vanavasi villages in contact		2629
Kalyan Vahini/ Gram Samiti		250
Vanavasi Vistaraks		12
Mahila Samiti		84
Shradha Jagaran Satsangs		42
Students	Boys	124
	Girls	71
Hostels	Boys Hostel	7
	Girls Hostel	4
Education	Bal Sanskar Kendra	33
Medical	Arogya Rakshak	99

Source: ABVKA office data of 2006, Keshav Dham, Paltan Bazar, Guwahati.

The VKA urges that the *janjatis* are part of a wider Hindu family because Hindus also worship nature (Tulsi, Ganga, Nag etc.). In the official and unofficial discourse on the ‘tribals’, the tribal society is always opposed to some perceived ‘mainstream’. When the VKA or other Sangh associates talk of the ‘mainstream’, however, they additionally define it in terms of Hindu religion and ‘culture’. This is particularly true with regard to case of Northeast where the VKA’s persistent effort has been to establish historical

⁶⁸ Interview with G.S. Kothari, (Senior Adviser, VKA), Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, Keshav Dham, Guwahati, November 30, 2006.

religious links between the tribals and India at large, with the help of myths and legends. The VKA like all the other Sangh affiliates has been talking of an anti- Christian crusade in the Northeast. By equating nationalism with 'Hindutva', the RSS portrays conversion to Christianity as anti- national and separatist.⁶⁹

While the Kalyan Ashram blames Christian missionaries for endangering janjati culture, it does little to protect it other. The only activities remotely associated with retention of indigenous cultures are celebration of tribal folk songs and dances. Even the medium of instruction in most of its schools is Hindi and local dialects do not occupy any place of importance in the educational system. Sanskrit is glorified and taught in most of the schools run by the VKA.

The Janjati Dharma Sanskriti Protection Forum, an affiliate of the VKA, organized a five day Janjati youth convention in Guwahati from 24th to 28th December. More than 4,500 tribal youth including 120 representatives from over 200 tribal communities participated in the convention. Shri Jagdev Ram Oraon, president of VKA, said janjatis have made supreme sacrifice for the nation right from the days of Ramayana, Mahabharata and even the British days, citing the names of several tribal leaders who had laid down their lives during independence.⁷⁰ The presence of local 'notables' like Shri Kanak Sen Deka, president of the Asom Sahitya Sabha, Shri Dhirendranath Chakravarty, editor of Daily Assam and Swami Yatridanand Giri went on to prove the VKA's remarkable influence in the civil society of Assam.

The Ashram's official policy is to abstain from taking government funds, to avoid interference in its working and recruitment procedures. While local business families (particularly the Marwaris) form the major source of funding, the Ashram also gets huge

⁶⁹ Nandini Sundar, 'Adivasi Vs Vanvasi, the politics of conversion in Central India', Paper presented at Conference on *Religious and Social Fragmentation and Economic Development in South Asia*, A D White House, Cornell University, Oct. 15-16, 2005, p. 3.

⁷⁰ *Organiser*, January 14, 2007, p. 16.

contributions from NRIs through the US based India Development Relief Fund (IDRF) and the UK based Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh.⁷¹

Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh

Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh's activities in Assam started in 1969 under the guidance of Shri Bajendra Prasad of Tinsukia, who was a Zilla pracharak at that period. During 1969-70, BMS made an entry in the tea gardens of Cachar, with the help of Shri Dwarika Prasad Yadav.⁷² Assam has approximately 870 tea gardens and the BMS is active in around 140. The BMS is now trying to make inroads in several tea garden associations, which are considered to be traditional Congress strongholds.

Apart from the above mentioned organisations, there are several other affiliates of the Sangh which have a presence in Assam. These include, Rashtra Sevika Samiti (operates among the women in society), Sewa Bharati (engaged in social work), Vivekananda Kendra (engaged in 'spiritual awareness'), Sanskar Bharati (involved in disseminating Hindu culture), Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad (Literary Society), Itihas Sankalan Samiti (Historical Association), Sahkar Bharati (Cooperative Society), and Sanskrit Bharati (Sanskrit association).

It is thus evident that the RSS has made inroads into every possible sphere of the Assamese society. It has thus created an impact, though not very significant, in the society of Assam today. Through its vast network it has managed to bring people of diverse fields within its fold. Historians, academicians, social workers, students, journalists, etc. are all part of this massive network. Their services are many a times used by the RSS, even without them being aware of their role in fulfilling the agenda of Hindutva. It is also interesting to note how Hindutva has adapted to the local features and specificities of the region, like the Assamese language, the Sankardev and sattra

⁷¹ South Asia Citizens Web (SACW) and Sabrang Communications 'A Foreign Exchange of Hate' (SACW and Sabrang Communications, 2002).

⁷² Interview with Prahlad Sharma, (Pracharak, Sewa Bharati), Sewa Bharati office, Lachitnagar, Guwahati, Assam, December 2, 2006.

traditions, the cultural mores of the Borgeet and Naam- Ghar etc. Further, the issues of conversion and infiltration have also been successfully employed by the RSS and its affiliates to consolidate the Hindus in this region.

CHAPTER 3

HINDUTVA'S POLITICAL EXPERIMENT IN ASSAM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ELECTORAL POLITICS OF THE BJP

This chapter explores how Hindutva makes its political experiment in Assam, through its political affiliate, the BJP. Beginning with a general understanding of the political scenario in Assam, it analyzes the growth of the BJP in shaping its electoral achievements and failures, in the context of the political dynamics in Assam. It also examines the agenda undertaken by the BJP to enlarge its political base. Finally, it highlights the recent emergence of the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF), and its impact on the politics of Assam in general, and the politics of Hindutva in particular.

The BJP's predecessor, the BJS, had not won a single seat in any election in the state of Assam, indeed in the region, previously, ever since its formation; though one of its leaders had won the Barhampur seat in Nagaon district, as a member of the Janata Party in the 1978 Assembly elections. Neither as the BJS, under which label it contested elections in 1952, 1962, 1967 and 1972, nor as BJP in 1985, was the party able to win a single seat; its share of the vote, too hovered around one percent. And yet with such a dismal record, the party won 10 out of the 48 Assembly seats (Ratabari- SC, Patharkandi, Karimganj North, Karimganj South, Hailakandi, Silchar, Sonia, Dholai (SC), Katigora and Dhubri) and 2 of the 8 Lok Sabha seats in (Karimganj- SC and Silchar) it contested in the June 1991 elections.¹

In the 1991 assembly elections, the BJP, which was never before a significant force, won 10 seats and polled 6.4 percent votes. In the 1991 parliamentary elections again, the BJP polled a significant 9.6 percent votes, winning two seats. In 1996 Lok Sabha elections again, it polled 15.9 percent votes, winning one seat, while in the same year assembly

¹ M. S. Prabhakara, 'BJP and the North -East', in Praful Bidwai, Harbans Mukhia & Achin Vanaik (ed.) *Religion, Religiosity and Communalism*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996) p.206.

election, it polled 10.4 percent votes, winning 4 seats. In the 1998 general elections, its position was static with only one seat again, and in 1999 Lok Sabha elections it won 2 seats. The 2001 Assembly election witnessed a surprising alliance between the AGP and the BJP leading them to retain 8 seats with 35.8 percent of votes.² In 2004 General elections again the party registered 2 seats, while in the 2006 Assembly polls, it secured 12 seats, equivalent to 11.98 per cent of the votes.

How and why has the BJP then made these gains? Any analysis of the BJP, or indeed of any other political phenomenon in Assam, has to take into account their specific, indeed unique, social and cultural situation, the history of the immediate past especially the events and polemics that accompanied the transfer of power in August 1947, and the very location of the region in the physical, economic and political periphery of the Indian state.

Political Landscape of Assam:

The Congress Hegemony

Assam has historically been one of the strongest bastions of the Congress with a record uncontested primacy of the party between 1946 and 1978. Since 1952, except for the 1978 and 1985 assembly elections and its debacle in the 1996 elections, the Congress has been winning all the parliamentary and assembly elections in the state. This was because, starting with the period of its inception in Assam, the Congress was thriving on the support of the Assamese middle class and the newly emerging educated elite of the British days, who were championing the cause of 'Asomiya Nationality'.³ In the Assamese dominated areas of this valley, because of the influence of this elite, the Congress became its 'spokesperson' and generally won their support by championing the 'nationality' question. On the basis of this sentiment, the Congress polled 48% votes in the 1946 elections. More importantly it polled 78.3% in the general constituencies.

² Sandhya Goswami, 'Vote Against Misgovernance Reflections on a By Election', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 5, 2003, p.1362.

³ Sandhya Goswami and A.K. Baruah, 'Fractured Identities: Politics in a Multi Ethnic State', *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 21- 28, 1999, p. 2494.

Such a pro- Assamese nationalist policy could be followed by the Congress in that period without much opposition primarily because the Surma valley in those days was not a part of Assam Congress. It was a part of Bengal Congress. The immigrant population though substantial was politically not at all organized and the Assamese speaking population held sway over the politics of the state. The communities like Bodos, Mishings and Karbis were yet to assert their identity. The Congress could therefore concentrate on winning the Assamese over. The party could do that rather easily by raising the issue of national identity of the Assamese because by that time, the Assamese middle class, for who this issue was important, had ascended to hegemony.⁴

But after independence a major Bengali speaking area, namely Barak valley, came under the jurisdiction of the Assam Congress. The Bengali population of both the valleys put together became electorally significant. With the continuous influx of refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan and with more and more tribal communities like the Khasis, Garos, Bodos trying to assert their own identities, the situation became increasingly complicated. In such a situation, the Congress' earlier policy of standing for the protection of the Asomiya interest became inadvisable.⁵ The Asomiya middle class was in the meantime becoming more aggressive. With the policies pursued by the Congress on issues like official language, medium of instruction, and establishment of refineries, the insensitivity of the party was becoming more pronounced. Further its attitudes towards the demands of the various groups like the hill tribes and the Bodos showed elements of uncertainty.

During this period when the Congress base was chipping away, some regional parties like the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) with non- Assamese ethnic support base, began to do fairly well, though the regional groups formed in the Asomiya areas like the People's Democratic Party and the Ujani Assam Rajya Parishad could not make any mark in the electoral politics of the state. It was only after the six year long Assam agitation that regional forces in the Asomiya areas could become significant in the

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

electoral arena. It was under such circumstances that the compulsions of parliamentary politics seemed to have compelled the Congress to concentrate on the most organized and insecure sections of the society in Assam- the tea garden labourers and the immigrant population. As K.M. Deka shows, the rural Muslims and the tea garden labour voters had a tendency of voting en bloc for the Congress. Assam has a sizeable tea garden population and the only trade union organization to have first penetrated this region in Assam is the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). The Muslim immigrants have always been insecure particularly in view of the aggressive posture of the Asomiya middle class. In addition to this, they were also becoming more and more relevant in electoral terms because of their increasing number. Meanwhile the Left parties made a significant impact in the state in the 1978 Assembly election winning 24 seats, the CPI (M) alone bagged 11.

Decline of the Congress and the Emergence of the AGP:

Assam for the first time came under a non Congress rule in March 1978. In the Assembly elections held, just after the lifting of the National Emergency in 1977, the Janata Party headed by Golap Barbora came to power. However, in less than two years, the party collapsed. Barbora's cabinet colleague, Jogen Hazarika, revolted and formed a new party called the Asom Janata Party and eventually formed the government after withdrawing support from Barbora's assembly on September 4, 1979. Thereafter, Assam experienced the installation of three successive short- lived ministries:

- I. Jogen Hazarika, from September 9 till December 12, 1979
- II. Syeda Anowara Taimur, a Congress leader, from December 6, 1980 till June 30, 1981
- III. Keshab Gogoi, from January 13, 1982 till March 1982.⁶

This was followed by a tumultuous phase in Assam politics, when factional politics and defection led to a constitutional breakdown of the machinery of the government, leading

⁶ Abu Nasar Ahmed, J. Baruah & Ratna Bhuyan (ed.), *Election Politics in Assam: Issues, Trends and People's Mandate*, (New Delhi: Akansha, 2006), p. 42.

to the imposition of President's rule in the state. This period witnessed the beginning of the six year Assam movement, also known as the 'videshi kheda andolan' (the movement to drive out the foreigners), led by the All Assam Students Union and non-political platforms like the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad, and outbreak of insurgency and communal violence, especially during the bloodstained election of February 1983. The signing of the Assam Accord on August 15, 1985 by the Rajiv Gandhi government and the leaders of the Assam agitation finally marked the end of the Assam movement. Two months after signing the Accord, a new party called the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) was floated by the AASU and the AAGSP leaders. The new party pledged to work for a "free and progressive society based on secularism, democracy and socialism." Implementation of the Assam Accord was the central issue on which it sought the support of the state's electorate. Stating that keeping the Assam Accord in view it wanted to seek a permanent solution to the problem of infiltration of foreigners, the AGP's election manifesto promised that the party would take effective measures to preserve peace and unity among all sections of the people living in Assam. A new factor in the situation was the formation of the United Minorities Front (UMF) by sections of religious or linguistic minorities. If implementation of the Assam Accord was the major plank of the AGP, the UMF made scrapping the accord its chief election issue.

The state saw the first explicit regional party AGP, come to power after a sweeping victory (winning 72 seats) in December 1985. A spectacular 85% of the electorate participated in the election. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta was returned from two constituencies with impressive majorities. It embraced within its fold the rank and file of several smaller regional parties like the Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) and the Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad (PLP). This was supposed to be a path breaking development when a group of young and inexperienced leaders of a regional party had come riding to power, an achievement considered to be unparalleled in the history of student movement in the country. When the AGP government (supported by the BJP) was in power in Assam, it felt that the IMDT Act was coming in the way of expelling the foreigners that they wanted to expel. They began demanding that the centre repeal the Act and thus give a free hand to the government and the police to expel anyone that they

wanted under the Foreigners Act, without any judicial determination of the rights of those that were sought to be expelled.

But right from the beginning, the AGP government was least concerned about the issues of governance. Gradually, they forgot the foreigner's issue too, deported even fewer infiltrators than the Congress governments had done in the past and failed to bring in even the most basic concessions to their impoverished state from the Centre. However, the AGP did succeed in making inroads into the marginal and marginalized social base of the state. This has been proved well by the party's wins in the Assembly election 1996.

BJP's Growth: Agenda and Strategy (1991-1998)

Electoral politics in Assam, beginning 1985, reflected the emergence of a new trend. The one party dominant system was slowly giving way to a multi-party system in which political parties of various ethnic groups or smaller cultural communities started playing significant roles. The support base of the Congress party showed a remarkable decline, and towards the beginning of the 1990s, the AGP too had diluted its stand on the repeal of the IMDT Act, thus losing ground. A number of smaller parties (ASDC, UMF, etc.) articulating the interests of smaller ethnic communities and religious and linguistic minorities, had also been making their presence felt.⁷ There was a general sense of disillusionment among the people with regard to the major parties in Assam. The electoral compulsion was that either you woo the Assamese-speaking Varna-Hindu mainstream or you woo the minorities including the immigrant Muslims. This had certainly polarized the electorate on communal lines in a hitherto unprecedented manner and most importantly, in a blatant violation of the norm of civility.⁸

Amidst these regional and national forces, the BJP gradually emerged as an alternative power in the state. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Sangh Parivar had started creating ground in Assam since the 1970s. The ABVP, the student's wing of the RSS had

⁷ Sandhya Goswami & A.K. Baruah, 'Fractured Identities: Politics in a Multi ethnic State', *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 21-28, 1999, p. 2492.

⁸ Samir Kumar Das, 'Implicit Communalism', in Bimal J. Deb (ed.) *Ethnic Issues, Secularism and Conflict Resolution on North East India*(New Delhi: Concept, 2006), p.140.

played an important role in the Assam movement, through its massive support to the AASU, and had already created a foothold for Hindutva. The activities of the Vidya Bharati, Sewa Bharati, Kalyan Ashram, and the VHP further added to Hindutva's popularity in this decade. Moreover, the Ramjanambhoomi movement towards the end of the 1980s, had repercussions all over the country and gave Hindutva a tremendous fillip. This had its impact on Assam too. The VHP organized several *sammelans* in Assam to consolidate the Hindus here. It was in this backdrop that the BJP heralded its arrival into the region in 1991. The BJP won 10 seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly and 2 out of the 14 Lok Sabha seats from the state in June 1991.

By the time Assam went to polls in 1996, both for the parliament and the assembly, the non- Congress forces in Assam were getting together, initially on the issue of state repression. In mid- 1994 itself Hiteswar's Saikia's government was using the police and military forces to deal not only with the extremist elements but also more generally, with forces which were anti- government. The Terrorist and Disruptive Act (TADA) was being used almost indiscriminately to silence dissent. Congress found itself in a difficult situation not only because of the alienation of a large section of Asomiyas, but also because of the fact that the AGP had allied with the NAGP, the left parties both CPI and the CPI(M); even the ethnic, religious, and linguistic based parties like the ASDC and the UMF, had joined hands with the AGP, particularly in view of the unprecedented corruption and indiscriminate use of the repressive state machinery by the Hiteswar Saikia government.⁹ That state repression, corruption and ethnic identity remained crucial issues for the election becomes clear from the fact that almost all manifestos of the major non- Congress parties focused on these issues. The AGP manifesto promised to bring an end to maladministration and corruption.

The BJP too included a section called 'Administration' in its manifesto, in which corruption and violation of democratic rights were highlighted. The problems of tribals and other backward regions also figured in the manifesto. It is interesting to note here that

⁹ Sandhya Goswami and A.K. Baruah, 'Fractured Identities: Politics in a Multi Ethnic State', op. cit., p.2495.

except the BJP, none of the parties including the AGP, really harped on the issue of the detection and deportation of 'foreigners', though most of them insisted that immigration from Bangladesh should be stopped. BJP was the only party which advocated the pre 1985 AGP line. Upper caste Hindu leaders, mostly Bengalis began drifting into the BJP, because the latter had already acquired a substantial support base among them by describing the former as refugees, and the Muslims as infiltrators.¹⁰ The AGP made a comeback in the 1996 assembly elections, winning 59 seats with a vote percentage of 37.58, while the Congress managed to win 34 seats, polling 30.56% of the votes.¹¹ In the Lok Sabha elections, the AGP and Congress both secured 5 seats each, while the BJP could manage just 1.¹²

The Lok Sabha elections of 1998 were particularly significant as militant organisations, the ULFA and Bodo Democratic Front, had given calls to boycott them. The ULFA's main targets in this election were the AGP candidates and workers. This was in contrast to the 1996 elections when the ULFA had embattled the Congress candidates. The change in ULFA's attitude towards the AGP influenced the electorate to tilt their support towards the Congress. The problems of insurgency, corruption, ethnic identity, repeal of IMDT Act and stability constituted the main plank for election propaganda in 1998 Lok Sabha election. Most of these manifestos had focused on these issues but the parties did not have any answers to the problems related to the issues they raised. The BJP manifesto came out with a statement on how the party proposed to tackle the two crying problems of the state: illegal infiltration from Bangladesh and the problem of insurgency. In a section called 'North East' in its manifesto the BJP blamed the Congress government for its failure to check the illegal migrants in its narrow and selfish interest. Further, it promised to repeal the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal Act (IMDTA) and strengthen existing immigration laws and rules and enact new ones to make illegal infiltration difficult and deny the extension of benefits of citizenship to such entrants.¹³

¹⁰ Vaskar Nandy, 'Crisis of Chauvinism', *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 14, 2001, p.2617.

¹¹ http://www.eci.gov.in/StatisticalReports/SE_1996/StatisticalReport-AS96.pdf, as viewed on 10th December, 2006.

¹² http://www.eci.gov.in/StatisticalReports/LS_1996/Vol_I_LS_96.pdf, as viewed on 10th December, 2006.

¹³ *The Sentinel* (editorial), February 6, 1998.

The Assam Tribune (editorial), February 5, 1998.

One of the most obvious features of the headway made by the BJP in Assam in the last elections is that all the seats it has won are from areas predominantly inhabited by Bengalis- Hindus. However, post 1998, there was a change in the acceptance of BJP. Moving from a traditional support base among immigrant Bengali caste Hindus and Marwaris, the party had expanded its reach, witnessing substantial gains in support from groups that had previously shunned it, e.g., the scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes and even the OBCs. The Congress polled 38.9 per cent votes and secured 10 seats while the BJP's position remained static with only one seat, though it increased its vote share to 24.47 per cent.

BJP's Major Political Agenda: The IMDT Act

Soon after the BJP government came of power at the centre in 1998, it began to resonate the demand of the AGP and the AASU. As part of this campaign, the BJP-appointed Governor of Assam, General S.K. Sinha, sent a shrill report to the government in November 1998, which ended thus, "The silent and invidious demographic invasion of Assam may result in the loss of the geo-strategically vital districts of lower Assam. The influx of these illegal migrants is turning these districts into a Muslim majority region. It will then only be a matter of time when a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made. The rapid growth of international Islamic terrorism may provide the driving force for this demand."¹⁴

However, it seemed that it was not possible for the BJP to convince its coalition partners about the need to repeal the IMDT Act. In 2000, a former president of the AASU, Sarbananda Sonowal, filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court seeking a declaration that the IMDT Act was unconstitutional. He argued that the Act impeded the expulsion of foreigners from Assam, as was evident from the figures of foreigners expelled using the IMDT Act. It thus violated the right of the Assamese people to preserve their culture. The impediments against expulsion, he argued, were placed primarily by the reversal of the

¹⁴ Prashant Bhushan, 'An Unconscionable Judgement', *Outlook*, August, 3, 2005.

burden of proof from the Foreigners Act. Also, he pleaded that the restrictions placed on the complainant (about filing a maximum of 10 complaints and that too against persons residing only in his local area) contributed to the problem.

The Muslims: A Deciding Factor

The 2001 Census for Assam puts the Muslim population of the state at 30%. As has been mentioned before, there has been a steady rise in the Muslim population since 1911 in this region, as a result of which, the Muslims have always played a crucial role in the elections of the state. There are 23 Assembly constituencies in the state in which the Muslims constitute 50- 90 per cent of the total population. In other words, the Muslims constitute the decisive factor in 30 out of 126 Assembly constituencies. A few of the most important constituencies include, Karimganj South, Badarpur, Hailakandi, Jaleswar, Baghbor, Jania, Dhing, South Salmara etc.

For the Muslims of Assam, the issues like Uniform Civil Code and demolition of Babri Masjid have never been the deciding factors in elections, like in the other parts of India. The most sensitive agenda here is the IMDT Act, and much of the Congress popularity among the Muslims in Assam may be attributed to the party's stand on the said issue. The trump card of the Congress here has always been the IMDT Act. By opposing a repeal of this Act, and assuring 'permanent land pattas' to these minorities, the Congress managed to win the Muslim support in almost all the elections until 2006. This Muslim population, failed the Congress only twice before 2006,- in 1985 and 1996, when a spilt in the Muslim vote became inevitable due to the emergence of regional parties in the state. Analysis of the 1999 election reveals that the Congress got an overwhelming 57 per cent of the vote among Muslims.

BJP's anti Muslim stance:

As discussed in the previous chapter, a consistent approach shaped by the anti-Muslim attitude (founded on hatred and prejudice) to label the Muslims of Assam as “Bangladeshis” has been the main feature of the Hindutva politics in Assam for years.¹⁵

Some of the important resolutions of the BJP on Assam are as follows:

- The vote bank politics of Congress later to be emulated by other regional and sectarian parties, aimed at garnering the Muslim votes, partly by following the policy of appeasement and partly by accentuating their imaginary fears, has been one of the contributory factors in growth of Muslim Communalism in the country. The grave security implications of this short- sighted policy of expediency were either not fully gauged or its implications ignored.
- Another worrisome dimension of Islamic fundamentalism has been large scale ‘demographic invasion’ from Bangladesh and concentration of new pockets of settlement along the Indo- Bangladesh and Indo- Nepal borders. The large scale intrusion of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants had significantly altered the demographic complexion of North- Eastern states and has serious long- term political, social and economic implications.¹⁶

Over the years, however, the BJP has also managed to make inroads into the Muslim dominated constituencies like Nagaon, Karimganj, Dhubri etc. In fact the BJP had even put up a Muslim woman candidate in the Dhubri Lok Sabha constituency in the Lok Sabha poll 2004.

¹⁵ This approach was re-enacted in an ugly devil-dance on May 11 when an SMS reading “no job, no cloth, no shelter to Bangladeshis” flashed on mobile phone sets across Upper Assam. The campaign for the boycott of Muslims (“Bangladeshi”, as it has become, despite denials, a synonym for Muslims in Assam) was launched purportedly by a previously unheard group, Chiring Chapori Yuva Mancha. For four days most people were in complete darkness as to what actually had taken place. The move seems to be a well-planned strategy to cleanse the area of what they claim are “Bangladeshis”. Muslims of Assam are convinced this was not a “spontaneous” action of the people, but a gameplan of the RSS-BJP elements in the state. (see <http://www.milligazette.com/Archives/2005/01-15July05-Print-Edition/011507200502.htm>).

¹⁶ BJP Party Document: *Achievements and Looking Ahead: 1980- 2005*, Vol (9) , New Delhi 2006.

The BJP in Assam Under the NDA Regime : (1999-2004)

In the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, the National Democratic Alliance(NDA) was voted to power, of which, the BJP was not only the largest constituent but was also the single largest party in the Lok Sabha. For the 13th Lok Sabha election, the party had encapsulated its promise to the general masses of the country in the assurance, “Able Leadership, Stable Government”, which saw the party through and it came to power at the Centre.

In Assam, while the Congress continued its success, registering 38.42 per cent votes and retaining 10 seats again, the AGP with a blank was relegated to the background again. The BJP had reasons to feel encouraged at its performance to secure 2 most prestigious seats in the state; Nagaon and Guwahati, one an ULFA stronghold, the other, the state Capital comprising not only the urban, upper and middle class Assamese and other linguistic groups from across India, but the labour class as well; thus occupying the second position in terms of voter’s choice. The victory of Bijoya Chakraborty from the Guwahati Parliamentary constituency proved that the BJP, whose area of influence had so far been limited to the Barak valley, had made inroads into the Brahmaputra valley as well.

Seats won by the BJP in the 1999 Lok Sabha Elections

Constituency	Result	Party	Candidate	Votes	Margin	Electors
Guwahati	Winner	BJP	Bijoya Chakraborty	384771	75238	1355169
	Runner Up	INC	Bhubaneswar Kalita	309533		
Nagaon	Winner	BJP	Rajen Gohain	328861	35428	1113339
	Runner Up	INC	Nripen Goswami	293433		

Source: *A Comparative Analysis of Lok Sabha Elections, 2004*, (Guwahati.: BJP office, Assam Pradesh, 2005).

Moreover, the BJP also made inroads into the tea garden vote banks, traditionally considered a Congress bastion. The party had polled 32 to 36 percent of votes in these constituencies.¹⁷ The BJP's success at this point could be attributed mainly to the Kargil issue and also its promise to repeal the Illegal Migrants determination by Tribunal Act, thereby allaying the fears of the indigenous Assamese of being wiped out.

Summary of Results, 1985-99.

Year/ Election	INC	AGP	BJP	ASDC	UMF
1985 Assembly	25	65	0		18
1991 Assembly	66	19	10	4	0
1991 Lok Sabha	8	1	2	1	0
1996 Lok Sabha	5	5	1	1	0
1996 Assembly	34	59	4	4	0
1998 Lok Sabha	10	0	1	1	1
1999 Lok Sabha	10	0	2	1	0

Source: Sandhya Goswami, 'Changing Electoral Trends', *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 12, 2001.

¹⁷ Sandhya Goswami, 'Assam', in Paul Wallace and Ramashroy Roy (ed.), *India's 1999 Elections and Twentieth Century Politics*, (New Delhi : Sage Publications , 2003), p. 281.

In the course of its regime, the BJP, under the NDA regime, claimed the following achievements in the Northeast:

- The North-Eastern region was accorded greater attention by the government. To ensure sustained attention, a separate Department of Development of the North-East Region was set up in September 2001.
- The ban on NSCN (IM) has been lifted and talks held with its leaders in New Delhi for the first time have brightened the prospects of enduring peace in Nagaland. The Prime Minister's highly successful visit to Nagaland in October 2003 has accelerated the process of peace, development and emotional integration.
- Peace in the region has received a boost with Bhutan flushing-out anti-India militants from its soil. The training camps of ULFA, NDFB and KLO militants were smashed in the operation conducted in December 2003.
- Bodo people's aspirations for peace, normalcy and development were fulfilled with the memorandum of settlement between the Government of India, Government of Assam and the Bodo Liberation Tigers for the Bodoland Territorial Council within Assam. On December 7, 2003, the Interim Executive Council of the Bodoland Territorial Council was sworn in at Kokrajhar in presence of the Deputy Prime Minister and 2,641 BLT insurgents laid down their arms.¹⁸

With the NDA in power at the centre, the BJP tried to pace up its activities in Assam by collaborating with the AGP, under Prafulla Mahanta, who formed a natural ally now, with the Congress being the common enemy. In fact the secret killings of ULFA militants by the AGP government in Assam during this period, was said to have been supported by the NDA. At a recent press conference held on March 27, 2007, the present Chief Minister of Assam, Tarun Gogoi alleged that "The Bharatiya Janata Party-led NDA regime gave tacit support to the Assam Gana Parishad government

¹⁸ Achievements of NDA Government, <http://www.bjp.org/today/Achievements%20of%20NDA%20Government.htm>, as viewed on 6th February, 2007.

under chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta who perpetrated the secret killings of ULFA kins". He also alleged that the NDA regime and Mahanta had 'agreed in principle' to the concept of a greater Nagaland compromising on the state's territory.¹⁹ This may not have been entirely true, but the fact that the AGP and the BJP had come closer was evident from their decision to strike up an alliance, just before the 2001 state assembly elections.

AGP- BJP Alliance (2001):

"It is possible that the AGP and the BJP may land up as electoral allies. There is a danger that a BJP- AGP alliance might give fillip to Hindu assertionism and give a new Hinduist thrust to Assamese nationalism, which has historically been very inclusionary on the Hindu- Muslim question, thanks to the important place that indigenous Muslims have in the Assamese cultural formation."²⁰

The above words of Professor Sanjib Baruah, an eminent academician and political thinker of Assam, proved to be accurate before the 2001 Assembly elections in the state. The process of Hindu solidarity was openly manifested in the AGP- BJP alliance in the run- up to the state assembly election in 2001. The ruling AGP party, that had faced a concerted attack from the BJP, came around on the issue of deporting illegal migrants from the state.²¹ The dramatic turnaround in the AGP- BJP relationship was an anti-climax as the top leaders of both the parties suddenly realized the need of preventing the Congress from coming to power in the State. The alliance brought an abrupt end to the ruling four- party alliance at the state level of the CPM, the CPI and the Samajwadi party with that of AGP.

Political observers felt that the sudden change in AGP strategy could be attributed to its fear of the rising strength of the Congress (I) in the State. Earlier, the AGP's efforts to have an alliance with the BJP had failed owing to stiff opposition from the BJP's State

¹⁹ 'NDA supported secret killings in Assam', in <http://in.rediff.com/news/2007/mar/27assam1.htm>, as viewed on April 2, 2007.

²⁰ Sanjib Baruah, in an Interview to *Asia Source*, in 1999, www.asiasource.org (viewed on 6th May, 2007).

²¹ 'Poll Scene in Assam', *The Hindu*, April 27, 2001.

unit. The latter was of the view that the “growing popularity of the BJP in Assam” would be affected if it aligned with the AGP, which had the anti- incumbency factor going against it. Following this, the AGP in a resolution, adopted at its Nagaon conclave in February 2001, had said that the party would continue its anti- BJP stance because the BJP was a communal party. The BJP on the other hand had declared that it would fight the AGP on the corruption issue. However, after having turned down an offer of alliance from the AGP, the BJP suddenly changed its stance and agreed to talk to the AGP. The BJP is reported to have done this after Mahanta met Home Minister L.K. Advani in Delhi on March 31 and told him that the Congress was better placed to form the next government in Assam. Advani immediately called the State BJP leaders and talks between the two parties were resumed.²²

The alliance prompted a widespread resentment among party members on either side. BJP youth leaders held big rallies at the state BJP head office in Guwahati to protest against the alliance. A senior BJP leader, Hiranya Bhattacharya resigned from the party and floated a new party called Asom BJP at an impressive rally on April 11 at Nalbari. Hundreds of BJP workers and supporters attended the Nalbari conference to welcome Bhattacharya's move. BJP workers staged violent demonstrations in the district.

Again AGP legislators, belonging to religious minority communities were also divided over the issue of the party's alliance with the BJP. In Sonitpur district, about 500 AGP members joined the Congress(I), dismissing the electoral understanding with the BJP as a strategy aimed at getting Mahanta re- elected as Chief Minister and securing a Cabinet berth at the Centre for his wife Jayshree Mahanta, an MP. The dissidents may have been right in believing that Mahanta, who had been staunchly anti-BJP and had been running the State since 1996 with the help of the Left parties, had changed his strategy to suit his own political ends. The AGP-BJP move also united several religious and linguistic minority groups, who account for 28 per cent of the State's population.²³

²² ‘An Alliance of Convenience’, *The Frontline*, Issue 08, April 14- 27, 2001.

²³ Kalyan Chaudhuri, ‘Alliance in Trouble’, *The Hindu*, Apr. 28 - May 11, 2001.

This alliance also invited the wrath of the militant outfits in the state. Insurgent groups like the ULFA(United Liberation Front of Assam) and the NDFB (National Democratic Front of Bodoland) became particularly angry with the ruling Asom Gana Parishad for severing its ties with the Left parties, which were partners of the Prafulla Kumar Mahanta-led coalition government, and allying with the BJP. The extremist outfits backed up their violent campaign against the AGP-BJP electoral alliance with a dictate to the people not to vote for the ruling AGP-BJP combine. ULFA, through an editorial in its mouthpiece *Freedom*, launched a veiled campaign against the BJP, which it said was spewing the "venom of communalism" in Assamese society. It described the AGP as the "local collaborator" of the BJP, adding that "the people now feel that these local collaborators should be dumped in such a manner that history will have little chance even to condemn them."²⁴ Almost twenty political workers, including the official candidate of the BJP in Dibrugarh constituency, Jayanta Dutta, were killed by ULFA militants since the poll process began.

In the results that followed, the Congress defeated the four- party alliance led by the Asom Gana Parishad, winning 71 of 125 seats.²⁵ The AGP could win only 20 seats, while the BJP, the ABSU and the ASDC (U) won 8, 9 and 2 respectively. The defeat of the AGP-BJP alliance was predictable with AGP abandoning its former allies of the 1996 Assembly elections, and lending out the hand of support to the BJP at the last hour. The BJP's position was no better. Though the party had performed creditably in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections by winning about 29.84 percent of the votes, in the 2001 assembly elections it only polled 26.31 per cent.

²⁴ Kalyan Chaudhuri, 'Alliance Trouble', *The Hindu*, May 12 - 25, 2001.

²⁵ The new alliance included the AGP, the BJP, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and the Autonomous State Demand Committee (United).

Results of Assembly Elections 2001.

Parties	Contested Seats	Seats Won	Percentage of votes in seats contested
Congress	126	71	39.75
AGP	77	20	32.35
BJP	46	8	26.31
NCP	62	3	5.2
ASDC(U)	5	2	29.45

Source: Abu Nasar Ahmed, J. Baruah & Ratna Bhuyan (ed.), *Election Politics in Assam: Issues, Trends and People's Mandate*, op. cit., p. 48.

Details of Assembly Segments won by BJP (2001 Assembly Elections):

Constituency	Result	Party	Candidate	Votes	Margin
Karimganj North	Winner	BJP	Mission Ranjan Das	45429	17321
	Runner up	UMFA	H.R.A. Choudhury	28108	
Silchar	Winner	BJP	Bimolangshu Roy	45308	71
	Runner up	INC	K.Bhattacharjee	45237	
Dholai	Winner	BJP	P. Suklabaidya	26284	3354
	Runner up	IND	Kamakhya P. Mala	22930	
Katigora	Winner	BJP	Kali R. Deb	28766	6582
	Runner up	INC	P. Nandy	22184	
Golakganj	Winner	BJP	D.C. Sarkar	48808	23769
	Runner up	CPI	Alauddin Sarkar	25039	
Behali	Winner	BJP	Ranjit Dutta	33348	13529
	Runner up	INC	B.Tanti	19819	
Lumding	Winner	BJP	Sushil Dutta	28631	1358
	Runner up	INC	M. Chakravarty	27273	
Duliajan	Winner	BJP	R. Teli	34335	7595
	Runner up	INC	Amiya Gogoi	26740	

Source: *A Comparative Analysis of Lok Sabha Elections, 2004*, (Guwahati.: BJP office, 2005).

Lok Sabha Elections 2004:

With the NDA in power at the centre, the BJP, before the 2004 Lok Sabha polls gave a call for “*Shaktishali Bharat ke liye Shaktishali BJP*”. Its Vision Document²⁶, released just before the polls, included a special section on North East which promised to put an end to infiltration from Bangladesh and vigorously pursue the 3 D- formula- Detect, Delete, and Deport (illegal migrants from Assam). It also promised the assurance of peace and normalcy in all the disturbed regions of the Northeast.

The BJP also came out with a ‘Charge Sheet against the Congress government of Assam’, before the Lok Sabha polls of 2004. In this charge sheet, the BJP again criticized the Assam Congress for supporting the IMDT Act 1983, which allegedly gives protection to the ‘foreigners’ in Assam. It also attacked the Congress on the following grounds:

- for having failed in solving the problem of the tea labourers, inspite of the fact that the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangh had several Congress leaders at the helm,
- for using the state police force as party cadres, who involve themselves in several cases of crime and corruption,
- for having failed to protect the Adivasis who had been evicted from the fallow and waste government land,
- for the rise of unemployment in the state.

The BJP also claimed that it had made inroads into the tea garden voters, considered to be a traditional vote bank of the Congress in Assam. Briefing media persons about the BJP’s poll preparations in Assam, the party’s central observer for the state, Arun Sathe, alleged that the Congress had neglected the tea garden community and failed to address its problems.²⁷

²⁶ *Vision Document 2004*, Bharatiya Janata Party.

²⁷ Sushanta Talukdar, ‘BJP claims making inroads into Assam tea belt’, *The Hindu*, March 27, 2004.

In the 2004 polls, the anti- incumbency factor that swept across the country, seemed to have no significant impact on the electorate in Assam. However, this did not mean that the vote was in favour of the ruling Congress party. In Assam, there was a triangular contest between the Congress, the BJP and the AGP. The Congress support base among the minorities remained intact, the immigrant Hindu minority supported the BJP, while the indigenous people seemed to have rallied behind the AGP.²⁸ As the table below indicates, the Congress won 9 seats, followed by the BJP and the AGP at two each. The BJP repeated its tally of 1999, while the AGP recovered from its 1999 debacle when it won no seats.

Results of Lok Sabha Election 2004:

Party	Votes	Percentage of Votes	Seats Won
Bharatiya Janata Party	2,379,524	22.94	2
Indian National Congress	3,63,7407	35.07	9
Asom Gana Parishad	2,069,600	19.95	2
Independents	1,390,938	13.41	1

Source: http://www.eci.gov.in/StatisticalReports/LS_2004/Vol_I_LS_2004.pdf.

The BJP, which banked heavily on the ‘Vajpayee factor’ and one of Assam’s eminent cultural icons, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, did not achieve anything substantial. In fact, its vote share decreased from 29.84 per cent in 1999 to 22.94 per cent in 2004, along with its allies, JD (U) and one independent. The party retained the Nagaon seat where its former State President, Rajen Gohain defeated Congress’ Bishnu Prasad, and wrested from the Congress the Mangaldoi seat where its candidate Narayan Barkataki, a former State President of the party, defeated the sitting MP Madhab Rajbongshi. The Congress attributed its defeat in Mangaldoi to the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) lending

²⁸ Sandhya Goswami, ‘Assam: Mixed Verdict’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 18, 2004, p. 5523.

support to the BJP. As the ABSU did not put up a candidate in the constituency in order to extend moral support to the BJP, it helped in ensuring the victory of the latter. This was perhaps also due to the fact that the BJP had been skillfully exploiting the agenda of the Bodo Territorial Council, and of providing hill tribe status to the Bodos residing in the hill districts of Assam, in order to create a support base among the Bodos in Assam. The then Union Home Minister L. K. Advani, on a number of occasions had been extending the party's support to the idea of a territorial council for the Bodos.

Parliamentary Seats won by the BJP in 2004 :

Constituency	Result	Party	Candidate	Votes	Margin
Mangaldoi	Winner	BJP	Narayan Ch. Barkataki	345863	29866
	Runner up	INC	Madhab Rajbongshi	315997	
Nagaon	Winner	BJP	Rajen Gohain	342704	31412
	Runner up	INC	Bishnu Prasad	311292	

Source: *A Comparative Analysis of Lok Sabha Elections, 2004*, (Guwahati.: BJP office, Assam Pradesh, 2005).

The Bhupen Hazarika Debacle:

Perhaps the worst setback for the BJP in Assam in the 2004 polls was the humiliating defeat of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika in Guwahati, who lost to the Congress candidate Kirip Chaliha by 72,849 votes. This was in addition to the fact that in 1999, the BJP candidate, Bijoya Chakrabarty had won the same seat and was even made the Union Minister of State for Water Resources. To deny Chakrabarty a party ticket from the same constituency and to nominate Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, who had joined the BJP only a few days before the election, came as a shock not only to the party workers but also to the

political observers. The defeat of Bhupen Hazarika, brought to light the immaturity and lack of understanding of the BJP about the electorate in Assam. The BJP failed to realize that in Northeast India, popular names do not become instant hits in electoral battles, as was the case in many other parts of India.²⁹ To the sheer disappointment of the party, the common man's verdict did not go with Dr. Hazarika joining a political party. To the people in Assam, he was a popular singer and a cultural icon and they did not approve of his image blending with that of a politician's. Moreover, a candidate who was denied the Rajya Sabha berth from the constituency of nominated members, a couple of months before the general election, was given the ticket to fight the Lok Sabha polls. This sudden trust of the BJP on this singer thus raised doubts about the former's intentions. Also, the overlooking of Bijoya Chakrabarty by the party, who happened to be the most vocal among the BJP leaders in the State against the Tarun Gogoi government, was not taken well by the electorate. Thus Chakrabarty got all the sympathy of the voters and Bhupen Hazarika was left to fight a lost battle.

Assembly Elections 2006:

The Assembly elections 2006, witnessed the arrival of two new forces in the electoral scenario of Assam- the Bodoland Peoples Progressive Forum (BPPF) led by Hagrama Mohilary and the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF). For years the Muslims of East Bengali descent have traditionally voted for the Congress in Assam. The emergence of the AUDF signaled the desire to end this dependency.³⁰ However, the AUDF is not conceived as a Muslim party. It put up a number of non- Muslim candidates. The initiative towards the formation of this party was taken by Badruddin Ajmal, a successful merchant in the perfume business, and the head of the Jamiat Ulema- e- Hind, who had all the support of the Muslims. However, Hagrama Mohilary of the BPPF was perhaps the single biggest winner of this election: a remarkable achievement for a relative newcomer to electoral politics.³¹

²⁹ Abu Nasar Ahmed, J. Baruah & Ratna Bhuyan (ed.), *Election Politics in Assam: Issues, Trends and People's Mandate*, (New Delhi: Akansha, 2006), p.300.

³⁰ Sanjib Baruah, 'Impact of Assam Polls on Muslim Politics', *Times of India*, June 1st, 2006.

³¹ Sanjib Baruah, 'New Players in a New Regional Game', *The Telegraph* (Calcutta) Monday, May 15, 2006.

The polls dealt a major setback to the Congress in many ways. The party lost as many as 18 seats and its share of votes declined by a sharp 9 per cent, from 39.60 per cent in the 2001 polls to just above 31 per cent. The most important aspect was that the Congress majorly lost out in its traditional immigrant Muslim pockets, with the newly formed AUDF, eating heavily into its vote-base and registering victories in as many as 10 constituencies, with a vote share of over 9 per cent. The Bodo People's Progressive Front (BPPF) swept all the 12 seats in Bodoland. On the contrary, both the AGP and the BJP marginally improved upon their number of seats and the percentage of votes polled. While the AGP got 20.39 per cent of the votes and 24 seats, the BJP secured 11.98 per cent and 12 seats. The BJP made some substantial inroads into the tea garden belt. It not only succeeded in retaining the Duliajan seat in upper Assam but also wrested the prestigious Dibrugarh set from the Congress. In both these constituencies, tea garden workers constitute a major vote-base.³²

Results of Assam Assembly Elections, 2006:

Party	Constituencies	
	Contested	Won
Indian National Congress	120	53
Bharatiya Janata Party	125	10
Assam United Democratic Front	69	10
Asom Gana Parishad	100	24
Independent	316	22

Source: <http://www.indian-elections.com/assembly-elections/assam>

³² Udayon Misra, 'New Equations and Uneasy Alliances', *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 10, 2006, pp. 2291- 92.

Emergence of the AUDF: Its Significance

The AUDF was formed in reaction to its perceived apathy of the Congress towards the minorities.³³ Political observers further point out that Ajmal's decision was precipitated by the Supreme Court's invalidation of the IMDT law in July 2005. Acting on the petition of Sarbananda Sonowal, an AGP MLA, the Supreme Court struck down the IM[DT] Act, on July 12, 2005, terming it as unconstitutional. It was contended that the application of the IMDT Act to Assam alone was discriminatory since in other states, the authorities could resort to the Foreigners Act and throw out anyone that they wanted, without allowing recourse to a judicial Tribunal. Large segments of the minorities, dissatisfied with the Congress' inability to defend the IMDT Act, betted on the Assam United Democratic Front.

This happened just ten months ahead of the state Assembly elections in Assam, and the ruling Congress party, bent on returning to power in the state rushed to allay the fear and apprehension among the minorities. Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh constituted a Group of Ministers, with Pranab Mukherjee, then Defence Minister, to examine the fallout of the quashing of the IM[DT] Act, particularly its impact on the minorities. It was on the recommendation of the Group of Ministers that New Delhi came up with the February 10, 2006 notification which had the same contentious provision — vesting the burden of proof for an alleged illegal migrant on the complainant or investigating agency. The Bharatiya Janata Party and the AGP cried foul and said that the Congress has brought back the IMDT Act through the backdoor. However, with the BPPF winning one more seat than the AUDF, Ajmal could not gain the influence that he had fantasized about. And on the key regional issue in post-IMDT Assam illegal immigration from Bangladesh Mohilary and Ajmal stood in opposite camps.

³³ Rupakjyoti Borah, 'Assam Elections: Major Issues', <http://www.ipcs.org>, Article no. 1977, Date 23 March 2006.

The emergence of the AUDF is particularly significant for a party like the BJP which has been effectively playing the anti- Muslim card in Assam for quite some time. For most Hindus in Assam now, the fear of being of overpowered by a larger Muslim community, has concretized in the shape of the AUDF. It may be said that with the emergence of a Muslim- majority party in Assam, the chances of a polarization in the society in terms of religion may become sharpened in the near future. This in turn, may provide a favorable climate for Hindutva politics to operate in the state. Further the last Supreme Court verdict on the IMDT,³⁴ on December 5, 2006, stating that the onus of proving an illegal migrant in Assam would also be on the accused and not on the complainant; provided an opportunity to groups like the AASU and the RSS/BJP which had been vehemently opposed to the IMDT. These factors may in time facilitate the BJP in grounding itself further in the politics of Assam.

³⁴ The Supreme Court on December 5, 2006, struck down the union government's February 10, 2006 notification, stating that the onus of proving an illegal migrant in Assam would also be on the accused and not on the complainant, as is the case with the law that applies to all such people of doubtful nationality in the rest of the country. Today, there is euphoria in Assam yet again, after the Court struck off a provision that was soft on illegal migrants seen by many as part of Bangladesh's grand design for a 'demographic invasion' of Assam.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, an attempt has been made to understand the entry and expansion of Hindutva in Assam, a northeastern state of India, which apparently does not provide the most hospitable terrain for the growth of any mainstream ideology. Unlike the 'mainstream' Indian states, the Northeastern states are uniquely different, in terms of culture, history, habits and belief systems. Much of religious radicalism in the Northeast is embedded in ethnicity and does not exactly manifest itself in the way it does in other parts of the country. Religious radicalism here situates itself within an ethnic matrix and assumes a highly complex character.

The idea of 'Hindutva' does not play the same role here, as for example, in northern India. For one thing, a significant portion of the population in the Northeast happens to be of tribal origin, for whom the ideology of Hindutva does not have much appeal as it has to the Hindus of northern India. For another, even the Hindus living in the region for historical reasons, have been and of course, are by and large free from many of its orthodox ingredients. The spread of Vaishnavism particularly in the valley areas contributed enormously to the softening- and in many cases, obliteration of many inegalitarian social practices, rituals, orthodoxies and dogmas prototypical of Hindu caste system. As a result, Assam was and to some extent is, by and large free from the maladies of communalism and casteism.

As a result, for a 'cultural' organization like the RSS, whose mobilization revolves around certain traditional Hindu stereotypes like 'Ram', 'Ayodhya' etc., it becomes difficult to make inroads into such territory. In the absence of a 'Ram- Hanuman' oriented cultural milieu, the RSS has adapted itself to the local traditions, rituals, customs, beliefs and conventions of the region. It also exploits the insecurities, dilemmas and fears of the native communities with regard to several political and social issues that have marred this region from the past several decades.

As the study reveals, the history of the early years of Hindutva in Assam, despite being similar in many respects to its history in other provinces, is quite novel in its own way. Assam, a region of many diversities and contradictions, still retains some unique features

of Hinduism, manifested in particular in the Kamakhya cult and the Sankardev- Sattra traditions. Further the presence of a considerably large population of Muslims in the state, and the rising alarm of the natives to the accelerating influx of the Bangladeshis, provided a tailor made ground for the RSS to operate in the region. What we saw were the ways in which issues (like infiltration) of the colonial period were reinvented by the nationalist and post-colonial leadership/discourses, and appropriated by an identity seeking Assamese Hindu upper caste- middle class. Together these provided a congenial climate for the development of Hindutva.

Further, the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries among the tribals in the state since the colonial period, also gave the RSS an opportunity to play its anti- Christian card. They argued that Christianity was 'westernizing' the tribals and luring them to adopt a foreign culture and religion, thus drawing them away from their traditional faiths. They also alleged that Christian missionaries have had a great role to play in antagonizing the tribal people against the nation by supporting underground secessionist movements. On the basis of these arguments, Hindutva has succeeded in making grounds in the tribal regions of Assam, through the social work of its affiliate, the Kalyan Ashram. But it must be noted however that much as westernization through Christianity and western educational system can be seen to have uprooted the people from their cultural soil, Hinduisation has also done the same. If Christianity is to be blamed for the modernizing changes that have "civilized" and thereby de-tribalised the tribal people, the same allegation can be leveled against Hinduism.

Though the RSS entered Assam as early as 1946, it could not create a significant impact in the beginning, owing to its unpopularity after the assassination of Gandhi in 1948 by one of its previous members. During this phase it concentrated mainly on strengthening its organisation by creating networks through local notables, opening shakhas and consolidating its activities. The 1950 earthquake in Assam, provided the RSS one of the initial entry points in this region, when it undertook extensive relief work for the earthquake victims. The language agitation of 1959-60, targeted against the Bengali Hindus in Assam, provided another opportunity to the RSS in the state, especially in building its support base among the Bengalis.

The AASU agitation over the detection and expulsion of the Bangladeshis, and the Nellie massacre of 1983, provided succour to the RSS as well, which malevolently twisted the Assamese – Bengali conflict into a Hindu- Muslim discord. The ABVP, the students wing of the RSS, played an important role in the Assam movement, through its massive support to the AASU, thereby creating a foothold for Hindutva. Further, organizational ingenuity, crucial political patronage, and the activity of its vast network of affiliates, have contributed significantly, towards establishing Hindutva in Assam.

Added to this, the RSS through the use of demographic exaggerations, constantly acts to instill a fear psychosis among the native Hindu population of becoming outnumbered and even extinct, in their own state. The frequent recourse to a “Muslim conspiracy” of making Assam a part of Bangladesh has created havoc in the minds of the Hindu population, thus giving the RSS even further scope to spread its activities. It may be true that communal considerations might have played a part in bringing in an ever-increasing number of immigrants from erstwhile East Pakistan for broadening and consolidating the support base of the Muslim League, which was reigning in the early part of the twentieth century in Assam. However the idea of a “Pakistani/ Bangladeshi conspiracy” aimed at transforming the demographic composition of Assam, seems to far fetched, at least at this stage. In *most cases, these poor migrants are forced to cross the border in search of employment and livelihood, as the density of population in Bangladesh is enormous. Moreover, it is also important to note here that the Hindutva forces do not make any differentiation between the immigrant Muslims and the native Assamese Muslims. The Assamese Muslims, who had been a part and parcel of the Assamese society since the medieval times, had assimilated completely with the local culture and even made important contributions for its enrichment. Nonetheless, Assamese Muslims today, like Muslims all over India, are now aware that that the RSS/BJP elements are ready to call them “outsiders” and that they could be potentially vulnerable to violence directed against them.

The RSS is a dynamic organization which may be analyzed culturally and socially at one level, and politically, at the other. Besides being a communal organization, it plays many more roles in civil society. Its presence in virtually every possible sphere of society has given it the appearance of a broad social movement. In Assam the prominent affiliates of

Hindutva include, the ABVP; which is the students wing, the VKA; which works in the tribal belts, the Vidya Bharati; which works in the field of education, and the VHP; which mainly works for uniting the Hindus, mainly through cultural activities.

The BJP, Hindutva's political affiliate, carries forward its agenda in the political sphere. The strategies and politics of the BJP discussed in chapter 3, indicates this clearly. Its skilful manipulation of the IMDT Act, its alliance with local players like the AGP, its policy of nominating local cultural icons like the form of Bhupen Hazarika, reflect its strategic political planning and foresight. The emergence of the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF), a Muslim majority party, in Assam has added a communal dimension to the electoral politics of the state, and in a way created a favourable climate for radical forces like Hindutva to flourish.

An analysis of Hindutva's experiment in Assam, reveals that though it has made considerable inroads into the region, it has not been successful yet in drawing a mass appeal. Even in present day Assam, the mention of Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh does not evoke any sense of recognition to a common Assamese. Given that the organisation has proved in consolidating itself through its Parivar network, there remains always a possibility for Hindutva to emerge as an assertive force in the region.

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