

**STUDENTS AS AGENTS OF IDENTITY FORMATION:
ANALYSING THE POLITICS OF STUDENT MOVEMENTS IN ASSAM
(1960-2006)**

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KAUSTUBH Kr. DEKA



**Centre for Political Studies.
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067**

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Centre for Political Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067, India

Tel. : 011-26704413
Fax : 011-26717603
Gram : JAYENU

DECLARATION

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “Students as Agents of Identity Formation: Analysing the Politics of Student Movements in Assam (1960-2006)” submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) of this university, is my original work and has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other university.

KAUSTUBH Kr. DEKA.

CERTIFICATE

It is recommended that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

PROF. GOPAL GURU
(SUPERVISOR)
SUPERVISOR
Centre for Political Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067

PROF. VALLERIAN RODRIGUES
(CHAIRPERSON)
Chairperson
Centre for Political Studies,
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067

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Responsibility for any shortcoming on the part of this research, however, remains solely mine.

Kaustubh Kr. Deka.

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CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction to the Study	4-14
Chapter One:	
<u>Understanding Student Movements, Locating the Framework for Assam</u>	15-44
Chapter Two:	
<u>Contextualising Student Politics in Assam: Analysing its Growth.</u>	45-95
Chapter Three:	
<u>Historical and Political Evolution of Student Movements in Assam:</u>	96-150
<u>Some Prominent Organizations</u>	
Conclusion:	
<u>The Changing Trends of Student Politics in Assam: Possibilities and Limits</u>	151-160
Bibliography	161-167
Appendix	
<i>Documents</i>	

**STUDENTS AS AGENTS OF IDENTITY FORMATION:
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Introduction to the study

Preface:

Political activities, on the part of students with agendas for social change, have been a noted feature of modern history across the world. However, serious engagements in political-sociological research on the subject began to take place only after the 1960s, a period that was witness to outbreak of powerful student movements in the advanced industrial societies. Gradually, the realisation of the limitations set by a general and universalistic framework that was initially adopted for studying these movements, led to a broadening of focus that aimed at locating appropriate theoretical framework(s) for analysing different student movements in the totality of their implications. Thus, the need for transposing the local specificity of these movements into a broader conceptual framework on the one hand, and the simultaneous methodological necessity of putting these movements in their specific socio-political backdrop on the other, came to occupy a centre stage in the discourse.

The focus of this research, the state of Assam has a vibrant legacy of student movements. Assam has been the stage for the single biggest student movement in the post-emergency India that came to be known as 'the Assam Movement', (Shah, 2004: 210). Though the nature and extent of the social 'inclusiveness' of the movement remains a matter of contestation, a fairly established fact is the attainment of an intense synergistic relationship between students as a social group and the other groups in the society- a relationship that subsequently lead to significant and sustained processes of social transformation in the state. As an observer comments:

“The Assam movement (1979-85) is unique not so much because it has catapulted the students into positions of leadership and then power during 1985-90 but very much because they have been overwhelmingly successful in providing leadership to a movement that could involve almost all segments of the greater Assamese community including of course the peasantry that constitutes the most numerous part of it” (Das, 2002: 132).

While acknowledging that all social activism on the part of the student’s need not per se qualify as student movements, the focus of this study is to study the circumstances influencing the rise, growth and stagnation of student politics as social movement. In other words, this research focuses on the politics implicated in the becoming and unbecoming of the social movement manifestation of organised student power, as studied in the context of a few prominent student organisations in Assam. We will examine, the various perspectives that has been used to understand the rise and growth of student movement under differing circumstances

Perhaps the most interesting trend observable in Assam is the instrumentality of student movements as agencies of social change. The evolution of student movements in Assam is intricately interwoven with the evolution of the much contested community identity indicative of the contested socio-political history of the state. As such, the politics of student movements has also been serving as an efficient tool for harnessing the resurgence of multiple, contesting communities within one political society or administrative-politico unit, wherein this has even led, in some instances, to eventual demands of separate home-lands.

Given these realities, locating an appropriate political-sociological framework for studying the powerful student movements in contexts like Assam becomes a challenging but essential task.

Research questions and hypotheses:

The research critically engages with the following problematic aspects of student politics in Assam,

One, do the students as a social category dominated by unequal power relations, act as mere objects of history, merely as a resource group subservient to other organised social-political groups and classes like political parties, middle-classes, trade unions etc.?

Two, or do the students act as active subjects of history? Can we find situations in history wherein their unity with other social groups and classes by either absorbing or neutralizing their interests¹ has enabled them with a potential to effect social change? Does this process of enabling present a case of higher unity conducive to the interests of the student as a social hegemonic class?

Three, in a situation like Assam marked by contending issues of 'unity of community' and multi-ethnic resurgence, do the students affect social change, by merely upholding the shared 'normative consensus' prevailing in the society at a particular time or does their domination in the social sphere signify only a politics of consensual domination?

The study proceeds to testify the following research hypothesis:

(A) Through the bodies of different student's organisations, various groups of people in Assam (poised and contested as communities, ethnicities, nationalities, national-groups, etc.) are trying to maintain, assert, and at times revive their specific community-ethnic identities aimed at strengthening their respective positions within the 'opportunity structure' of the state. Their negotiations for positions within the ethnic coalition in the state, that essentially hinges on the negations and assertions revolving around the definition of the 'Assamese' exposes the fissures in the hegemonic project of depicting one linguistically totalizing and culturally essentialising 'Assamese community'.

(B) The emergent politics of student movements in Assam is gradually being articulated by social blocks composed of new student wings that claim to represent different groups even as the older groups espousing similar causes are getting strengthened. Based on the internal- normative consensus of a particular group or reflecting the battle for consensual domination, various student bodies have assumed different level of social acceptance as the effective group-rights bearing

¹ Instances of 'expansive' and 'subversive' hegemony as put forth by Laclau Ernesto and C Mouffe (1985, p.192).

body. This marks an interpenetration of politics and culture (Cohen,1993) in the construction and articulation of identities; to establish, affirm and perpetuate boundaries between the self and the other, both contextually and strategically, for ‘symbolic-political-material ends’ (Barth, 1969: 35).

(C) The unique absorption and channelization of dominant groups of the student movements of Assam into the structures of state institutions and the notable resistance posed by some others towards it, during the decades of seventies and eighties reflects the transformatory potential of these movements that can translate into either binary of (a) structural critique or (b) institutional critique. The nature of the critique being influenced or determined by the position of the student group concerned on the discourse of nationality formation in Assam.

Research Design:

The research will approach the evolution of Student movements in Assam in the light of the dynamic processes of community formation in Assam. The research argues that the politics of student movement has been enabled over years, by particular socio-historical evolution to become an influential agency of social transformation. The analysis makes reference to two different frameworks:

1. The Marxian framework of Hegemony articulated by Antonio Gramsci and
2. The model of normative consensus of the society as forwarded by structural functionalist sociology.

The analytical framework used in this research views students movements in Assam as social movements which are the products of historical circumstances and as such ‘diachronic’ in nature as they denote sequence of events or processes in time (Karna, 1998: 21).

The research perspective of this study identifies as its area of focus- the agents and processes that organise the production of memory–history in Assam that constitute both a community and a platform for making claims about identity.

Scheme of chapterisation:

Chapter one: *Foregrounding the debates: understanding student movements and locating the framework for Assam.*

The phenomena of student power in Assam shows special trends, and has been more of an anomaly in the face of many a theoretical assumptions of researches on student movement. This chapter critically engages with the various debates on the nature of student movements and the relevant approaches to study them. The attempt has been to understand the specific nature and orientations of the student power in Assam while taking stock of differing opinions on this point, i.e., in terms of understanding this as a phenomena of revolt, as social movements or as youth agitations. Various viewpoints regarding the socio-political constitution of the category called ‘students’ and its implication in the socio-political space have also been examined.

Taking these aspects into account attention has been focused on the need to develop a culturally sensitive and historically informed framework for understanding the nature and evolution of the students’ movements in Assam.

Chapter two: *Contextualising student politics in Assam: analysing its growth.*

The politics of student movements in Assam is entwined with the ‘community building’ and nationality formation processes in the state, as understood through some key conceptual tools like nationalism, ethnicity and identity. As such any meaningful analysis of the course of the student movements in the state must be grounded on the following:

- Issues of ethnicity and the politics of identity in Assam.
- Issues of Assamese nationalism and the process nationality building in Assam.

The above two essentially inter-linked conceptual premises are crucial not only for comprehending the background of powerful student activism in Assam but also for understanding the fuller implication of these movements.

Chapter three: *Historical and political Evolution of student movements in Assam: some prominent organizations :*

The present chapter traces the illustrious evolution of student power in Assam on the basis of the trajectory of development of some prominent student organisations which amply reflect the political history of the society and polity in Assam.

For the sake of analytical clarity it would be appropriate to work out the chapter into following phases

- The phase of early Politicisation: nationalism and anti-colonial struggles.
- Phase of contestation and consolidation: the early decades of post-independence.
- Phase of ethnisation: the Assam movement and after.

The chapter also includes a case study of the following major student groups operating in the Brahmaputra Valley largely, each having their specific constituency within particular communities:

- All Assam Students Union (AASU).
- Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chattra Parishad (AJYCP).
- All Assam Bodo Students Union. (ABSU).
- All Assam Miching Students Union (TMPK).

Conclusion: *The changing trends of student politics in Assam: limits and possibilities*

Based on the observations of the trends and tendencies of the different student organizations and an analysis of their politics in the state, the study poses some further queries on the scope and limits of these agendas with regards to:

- The issue of agency of students as vehicles of social movements and as bearers of ethnic group rights.
- The question hegemony of a social class in the context normative community consensus.
- The nature of the critique.

Survey of the Existing Literature:

Scholarly interest in student movements in a sense is a rather recent phenomenon. As a branch of social science, research on student movements remained neglected till the 1970s. The present research will approach the existing body of work in this area from the following perspectives:

- It gives a general overview of the literature that conceptualise and generalize students movements across time and space while focusing on the works that look into the nature and development of student's politics in India from various perspective.
- It focuses on the specific work pertaining to the multifaceted nature and evolution of student's politics in the state of Assam.

As evidenced one comes across an array of literature studying 'students unrests', 'activism', 'movements' and so forth from a variety of perspectives. For the chapter dealing with theorizing of student movements one finds the following classification by Ross of the existing literature on the topic very insightful: (1) Political protests; (2) economic protests (3) moral protests (4) educational protests (5) psychological protests (Ross, 1969).

Two major books by two historians have been published on the activities of the students in Assam.

S Bora in her book *Student Revolution in Assam* (New Delhi, 1992) states the facts about the involvement of the students in the Congress led anti-British struggle in Assam from

1917-47. The information is mostly based on official records, Newspaper reports of the time and occasional publication of the student organizations, political parties and groups. The book is a chronological account of the events and does not engage in any conceptual theorization of the events and phenomena.

Meeta Deka in her *Student Movements in Assam*, (Delhi, 1996), covers the entire period from 1853 to 1985. She proposes an analysis of the political, cultural and socio-economic roots of student's protests in Assam. The stated objective of her work also include identification of the factors that motivated students into political action and highlighting the intensity, continuity and special features of students movements in Assam and to compare the same with student movement elsewhere in the world. Though she asserts that the student movement in Assam can be seen as social movement she remains firmly within the tradition of history writing where mere statement of fact suffices. As such her work does not attempt to examine the activities of the students in a movement framework.

Niru Hazarika in her book '*Profile of the Student organizations in Assam*' (Guwahati, 1998) has done a comprehensive profiling of the different prominent student's organizations of the state in terms of their organizational structure, stated objectives and a brief account of their achievements. Although confined in its limitation of being a periodic study(covering the period till 1998), the book serves as a ready handbook for a cursory look into the make-up of the prominent student's organizations of the state.

While profiling the youth organizations in North-East India, the author identifies some broad points that highlight the 'general' context of student politics in Assam. However, it does not say much about the particular orientation or nature that student movements have assumed in an ever prominent manner in the state.

A.K. Baruah edited *Student Power in North-East India: understanding student movements* (Regency, New Delhi, 2002), has been a significant contribution towards theory building for understanding the student movements in the regional context of North-East India. The ten essays in the volume by different scholars shed some serious light on different aspects of the politics of student movements in the region. The substantial introductory essay by A.K. Baruah, "Approaches to the study of student

movements”, deals at length with various theoretical problematics and methodological issues that one encounters in trying to conceptualise the phenomena of student movements in this area.

Abu Ahmed (ed) *Nationality Question in Assam, The EPW 1980-81 debate*, (Delhi, 2006) comes across as a rich source of essays by different scholars that debates the various aspects of the Assam movement of the 1970s and 1980s in which students were a crucial part.

On the same subject matter, Monirul Hussains *The Assam Movement, Class, Ideology and Identity*, (Delhi, 1993) also provides for an useful read as a sociological account for the movement.

There exist a number of other works, mostly by historians whose work on the history of Assam movement also record the peculiar manifestation of student’s power in the course of the event. However, their engagement with the issue of student movement being derivative, their work on the subject, by and large, remains theoretically superficial and even spurious. For example, B.K. Chattopadhyay, observes, “Being politically more conscious than their counterparts in other Indian states, the Assamese students came to the limelight whenever the state found itself confronted with any major social, economic or cultural- not to speak of political issues” (Chattopadhyay D.K., 1990, P.139.). But he never attempts to give any explanation for this peculiarity.

The research also takes note of the interest of scholars who have also focused on the influence of alienation and its politicizing effects on the students and their actions.

Scholars like Julien Nagel have developed an approach, which emphasizes the need to integrate the issues of student movements with the total aspects of social realities (Nagel, 1969: 80). He proceeds to build a framework, which will encompass student unrest all over the world. He calls this approach the conceptual framework of world Cultural Revolution. It looks at student movements as essentially questioning the status quo under the penetrating influence of Cultural Revolution into all the traditional values and concepts.

However, the very obvious limitation of this framework is its assumption about the universality of the cultural revolutionary values and its penetration across societies. It thus substitutes all societies with the ideas of a general society, which is undergoing a particular phase of socio-political changes (Baruah, 1991: 100-101). This excludes situations like Assam, where capitalism and its discontents have varied connotations for the emergence and continuation of student movements.

Scholars like Lipset and Worms (Lipset, 1967; Worms 1966) have tried to use the Parsonian model to understand student movements. This school of thought believes that student movements combine some feature of the family and occupational structures. They therefore view student movements as a process that helps transition to adulthood and maintain that the sharpness of disjunction between the values of the family and the larger society determines the rebelliousness of the students. Therefore, students from societies where traditional authority is breaking up are supposed to be more active in movements..

However, empirical studies in developed countries like England, USA, and France in the decades of sixties do not conform to these theses. Particularly, in post-colonial societies, student agitations reflect issues which are not directly relevant to the discontinuity of values and role expectations within the system. In Assam and other parts of Northeast India more often than not, campus specific issues alone have failed to generate strong student movements like the ones in the 60s of the West. A more striking aspect, in these societies is the failure of institutional deliverance to initiate a larger, wide-ranging, sustained, student movement as in some other states in India like Gujarat and Bihar in the decade of the 1970s.

Assam movement is also considered to be unique as it does not readily fall in line with the paradigm of student movements in Asia as portrayed by such scholars as Phillip G Altbach (Altbach, 1987:147-8) who argues that with the attainment of political independence, student movements in these countries have shown a remarkable tendency of shifting away from 'social issues' to 'campus related grievances'.

A striking feature of the Assam movement is the build-up of the social-relationships that emerged between the student leadership on the one hand and the vast peasant community on the other.

Conclusion:

Thus the observations on Assam highlight the significant congruence and contradictions between different markers of social mobilisation like nationalism, ethnicity and class in the platform of such movement and thereby draw attention to the questions of social rootedness of the student movements.

The focus of the study has been to locate and analyse student movements as social movements. As such it is to be emphasised that:

“Without opposition a social movement no longer exists or more precisely, it no longer exists as a social movement...a social movement exists because certain ideas are not recognized. In the analysis of social movements, then, it is equally essential to identify the opponents which a movement attacks as it is to recognize those whose interests it aims to defend. In addition, the group whose interest the movement represents and the group of opponents often compliment each other in various ways” (Rocher 1972: 152).

In this light one can examine the significant role as a vehicle of social mobilization and community transformation that the student movements have historically assumed in the transitional, multi-ethnic polity of Assam.

CHAPTER ONE

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT MOVEMENTS, LOCATING THE FRAMEWORK FOR ASSAM

The existing range of debates on the nature of student movements offers a variety of possible approaches for studying a particular student movement. The necessity however, is to focus on the specificities surrounding a particular student movement over a period of time. After dealing with the various viewpoints regarding the socio-political constitution of the category called 'students' and its subsequent implication, this chapter draws attention on the necessity of developing a framework that is culturally sensitive and historically informed to study this phenomena.

The phenomena of student power in Assam shows some special peculiarities that do not easily fall in line with many a theory assumption on student movements. Taking stock of differing opinions on this point, that range from understanding this as a phenomenon of revolt, as social movements or as youth agitations, the chapter tries to understand the specific nature and orientations of the student power in Assam. The objective is to use this analysis for evolving a framework for understanding the nature and evolution of the students' movements in Assam.

Accordingly the chapter is divided into different analytical-conceptual sections.

Section one

On interrogating the available body of theories that deal with the phenomena of student movements from various approaches, it is crucial to note that opinions differs substantially on the issue of conceding the characteristics of a 'social movement' to students activism under different circumstances. Different theorists prefer to study them under the aegis of concepts like 'student's agitation', 'student's revolution', 'student's

crisis', 'youth movement' and so on. These multiplicities of definitions are pertinent in the context of students' activism in Assam. To illustrate, one finds conscious theorisations of 'youth power' as active but non-homogenous agents of social change as distinct from organized group-activities in the form of student movements.

"The hegemony of youth groups does not bind them into a single group with a single ideology or identity. They are mainly available as a resource group for other organized groups such as political parties, Trade Unions, Student Movements etc. Throughout the world, youths, in search of autonomy and identity, have fallen easy prey to the winds of change."(Bora and Goswami, 2007: ii.)

However, within the same body of literature one finds contestation to this observation in the following words:

"At a more general level, youth politics in the North- East cannot be regarded as politics of the youth. For youth as one single, homogenous and monolithic category does not exist in the region...as either a socially homogenous or a politically organized group or both. As we will argue, the youths in the region remain not only ethnically divided but also strongly wedded to their respective ethnic groups and communities. They are also seen to be involved in representing these bodies while engaging themselves in politics. Almost all communities in the region have their own students' union or federations meant for articulating and representing the interests and concerns specific to their respective ethnic communities" (Das S.K, 2007: s27).

Our discussion here shares space with the later formulation and emphasizes the social embeddedness of the students of Assam wherein the history of Assam has been repeatedly manifest by 'student movement' dimensions of organized youth-student power. Also we focus on the multifaceted processes that influence the rise, growth and stagnation of organised student power in Assam as a social movement. Attempts will be made to bring in the issue of nature and orientations of the student movements in Assam. This will be of assistance in locating the relevant framework for studying student movement in Assam.

Various Perspectives to study student movements:

The substantial frequency of occurrence of student movements worldwide, although varying in degrees and intensity, have stimulated a variety of approaches that study its causes, nature and evolving trends. This resultant effect is the existence of a plethora of approaches that range from the individual to the organizational behaviour pattern, from the sociological, educational, economic, and political to the psychological and philosophical perspectives. In the process of shedding light on the various aspects of the phenomenon of student movement these approaches also establish the multifaceted nature and the implications of this phenomenon. In the following we discuss, in brief, the various primary approaches that come to use in the analysis of the complex issue of student movement.

A. Student Movements as Social Movements: Issues and Contestations:

A social movement has classically been viewed as "a large group constituted in support of a set of purposes or beliefs that are 'shared' by the members . . . and represents an effort by a large number of people to solve collectively a problem that they feel they have in common" (Wilkinson, 1971: 27). Social movements therefore, embrace certain ideas and philosophies that justify their aims, and they use symbols that evoke feelings of group solidarity that are expressive of shared collective concerns. Social movements also typically have some kind of organization with leaders, spokesmen, and representatives. Notwithstanding these and other attributes of a social movement, a necessary (if not sufficient) characteristic is the existence of a common ideology or belief system involving attitudes that are functionally interdependent serving to define the mission and rationalize the goals of mass activity.

As Wilkinson explains, a social movement is a deliberate collective endeavour to promote change in any direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution or withdrawal into 'Utopian community';

A social movement must evince a minimal degree of organization, though this may range from a loose, informal or partial level of organization to the highly institutionalized and bureaucratized movement and the corporate group;

A social movement's commitment to a change and the *raison d'être* of its organization are founded upon the conscious volition, normative commitment to the movements' aims or beliefs, and active participation on the part of the followers or members.

Another important aspect of treating student activism as social movement is to emphasise on the mutually constitutive role of the students and the historical tradition and the crucial role students occupy in a society's history. (Wilkinson, 1971: 27-30).

Philip M. Burgess and C. Richard Hofstetter (Philip M. Burgess; C. Richard Hofstetter, 1971), who conducted extensive survey in some of the premiere American Universities points out the non-social movemental character of student's agitation. However, factor analytic criteria and survey methodology revealed the existence of a greater degree of functional interdependence among attitudes and opinions among university students. This was congruent with "student movement" interpretations of campus disruptions in particular and youth culture notions of student attitudes in general. In fact, the pluralistic structure of attitudes among students appear to be more of an approximation of the general population rather than the widespread contemporary assumptions which are based on notions of 'youth culture' , 'Student movement and Generation gap' hypotheses. The findings provide strong evidence for the existence of a highly-differentiated opinion structure- not typically characteristic of a 'social movement'. Hence, the absence of a universalistic attitude structure with reference to the major issues and participants/participation in the disruption suggests that it is inappropriate to classify students as binary sympathetic and hostile to certain demands as a part of a 'student movement'. And yet students and student groups who apparently possess highly integrated coherent attitude structures with regard to contemporary issues and to local and national personalities are commonly observed on university campuses. They write:

"Moreover, these are the students that are typically 'covered' by the media and encouraged to speak for "the students," and these students-highly motivated and vocal-increasingly command the attention of campus administrators and campus

newspapers. These findings suggest that they speak more for themselves than for others, that references to what, " the students " think, or believe, or want or demand, etc., are references to a very small number of ideologically-oriented students, a number clearly too small to influence a factor analysis based on a representative sample of the student body. This smaller, more ideologically consistent group of students is able to create the excitement and the drama that attract large crowds, that then attract the attention of the media and the administrators. While these crowds appear to consist of ideologically uncommitted participants and spectators, they reflect the well-known dynamics of crowd behavior and not infrequently erupt into riots and violence" (ibid).

Neil J. Smelser's analysis of social movements brings out the importance of structural strain as an important sociological factor encouraging student movements (Smelser, 1962: 13-18) According to Smelser, a society must be structurally conducive to the development of the type of elementary collective behaviour that will lead to a social movement. In other words, the conditions in the society must be such that new types of behaviours are possible, or are likely to appear. If, for example, a society is divided into competing groups on an ethnic, religious or socio-economic basis, it will "form a set of structurally conducive conditions for the flow of hostility."(ibid:14). Thus, according to Smelser, the essential factor is the structural strain, accompanied by feelings of anxiety and frustration. Smelser states that the strain is institutionalized. However, the idea of action must spread through the group in economic, political, religious or other social relationships before it can lead to more than an individual deviant behaviour. In other words, the situation must have a common meaning for those who share the strain, so that they are willing to act together. Such conditions will determine the arousal of a collective action that gradually transforms into an organized social movement integrated into the structure of society. At every point in this development of action, the instructions for social control, such as the government, the police or public opinion, may play decisive roles in lessening or increasing the activity (ibid: 15).

Such conditions as suggested by Smelser can be viewed as a characteristic of the Assamese society that encourages student movements. Thus, the phenomenon in Assam lends itself for study using Smelser's analysis of social movements- 'A set of structurally

conducive conditions for the flow of hostility'. The geo-political history of Assam and the cultural pluralism arising out of Assam's colonial historical roots and a comparatively economic backwardness for which the Centre is held responsible; as also the subsequent growth of regional consciousness provided for a congenial environment for the rise, growth, sustenance and frequency of student movements through the early decades of the twentieth century. The environmental constraints as represented by the instruments of social control such as the government, police or public opinion, which determines the severance or sustenance, the dilution or intensification of student activities (Deka, 1996: 232-235). Moreover, in the post-independence period, student movements in Assam marked its adherence to the quintessential characteristics of social movement as defined by Wilkinson (Wilkinson, 1971).

Student movements in Assam have their roots in an unstable society, marked by contestations for cultural hegemony and socio-economic structural strain created by migration and inflated demography. Such roots have been identified from Smelser's analysis of social movements, in which point to 'a set of structurally conducive conditions for the flow of hostility'; and where 'the new types of behaviour' surface constantly to produce them (Smelser, 1962).

Thus, the obvious and most significant feature that provided fertile ground for the rise of student protests in Assam was its historical tradition that asserted the role of students as a dynamic force for political, educational and socio-economic historical transformation. Lipset has stated:

"It is important to note that the campus has not suddenly exploded, that there is a substantial tradition of student political concern and activity, and that students have played an important role in revolutionary movements through the years"
(Lipset, 1967: viii.)

B. Studying Student Movement as a systemic crisis:

This perspective views the phenomena of student movement as essentially a sociological event. As a sociological approach, it defines student movements as 'a deeper problem of social change' (Comrack, 1961: xii).

M. Comrack states that any attempt to isolate the antecedent variables of student indiscipline must fit into the psycho-cultural gestalt or a sequence of life-experiences extending to socio-economic changes and changes in structure of family, marital problems, religion and politics. In fact Comrack symbolizes these changes taking place in India as "*the struggle between Lakshmi and Saraswati*". She believes that India's problem is the deeper problems of social change and not "student indiscipline", "corruption" or "party politics". In stable societies culture largely makes the man, and in societies undergoing social change, man largely moulds culture. (ibid: 20-22). While such an approach may be suitable to Indian conditions, it remains ignorant of the historical roots and is thereby insufficient for explaining the rise of student movements.

On the other hand advocates of the Parsonian framework, Clark and Clark (Shirley M Clark and John P Clark, 1972) hold that earlier theoretical formulations about the social and psychological sources of student movement, apparent in the works of Parsons are important for understanding the emergence of self-conscious, oppositional youth cultures and movements.

The main lines of the argument made by Parsons and Eisenstadt (Parsons and Eisenstadt, 1965) is that the self-conscious sub-cultures and movements among adolescents tend to develop when there are sharp distinctions between the values and the expectations embodied in the traditional families in a society; and the values and expectations prevailing in the occupational sphere. In a similar vein Clark writes, "The greater the disjunction, the more self-conscious and oppositional will be the youth culture" (Clark, 1972: 325).

Richard Flacks emphasizes that the instance of breakdown of traditional authority is most typically the point at which youth movements have emerged. (Flacks, 1967: 52-55).

Udayon Misra, similarly, puts student's agitation in Assam in a perspective thus:

"Proximity to power and the abdication of social responsibility by the older generation has done immense harm to the youth. The crisis of leadership of the older generation coupled with its opportunism and lack of social commitment created a social vacuum which was sought to be filled by the youth leadership

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which rode to power on the waves of a populist movement which did not have any ideological moorings or social vision” (Misra Udayon, 2007: 7).

However, contextualizing this theorization in the specific case of Assam and the third world societies in general, A.K. Baruah (Baruah, 2002: 14-15) contends that this perspective fails to account for the fact that student movements emerge not only in countries where such factors are present but also in others where they do not exist. It also falls short of explaining why, in particular societies student agitate over issues not related to the occupational structure or to the problem of discontinuity of values and role expectations. More importantly, it does not explain the reasons that enable them to mobilize mass support.

Bringing on a Marxian analysis for understanding student movements, Baruah points out that since the societal position of each class and its consciousness in the final analysis are determined by the position of these classes within the process of production, the students belonging to various classes in a society cannot, therefore, have similar consciousness. The consciousness of a student from a bourgeoisie socio-economic background will be different from a proletarian or peasant background. Baruah locates the capability of students to unite as a social group partaking in a movement, in the dynamics of the Gramscian concept of ‘hegemony’, and not definitely as an outcome of processes of unmediated social change alone. As he observes, this approach may not explain norm-oriented agitation related to campus issues. Baruah rightly argues that such a framework ignores the determinate situations in which students of determinate societies operate-‘the approach therefore interpolates the idea in the place of historical phenomena. It substitutes the concrete determinate society with society in general. And thus it enters the realm of metaphysics’ (ibid: 13).

C. Systems Analysis approach to the Phenomena:

Student organizations may be considered as a totality of many, inter-related, interdependent parts or sub-systems put together to achieve organizational objectives, and therefore as a system within which it operates. The environment itself consists of social, economic, political, cultural, legal, etc., subsystems.

The general premises of David Easton's Systems framework (Easton, 1965: 24-25) may be helpful for this particular study and for the construction of a model.

Firstly, it is useful to conceptualise student organization as a system for the purpose of analysis.

Secondly, it focuses on the existence of an environment of which the student organization is a sub-system and the constant interaction between the two.

Thirdly, what Easton characterizes as 'response' may be related to the process or operation by which the sub-systems relate to one another.. Process here implies those planned activities which affect the performance of the entire system. To quote Easton:

"Variation in the structures and processes within a system may usefully be interpreted as constructive or positive alternative efforts by members of a system to regulate or cope with stress flowing from environmental as well as internal sources" (Ibid: 23).

However, an examination of the approach points out that by outlining a boundary, even if at the conceptual level, we cannot study student organizations and their movements in their national and international settings. Moreover, it entails the danger of oversimplification by reducing reality to a conceptual skeleton in the case of complex phenomenon as the student movements in Assam. In fact, the systems frame has its own inherent weaknesses, as pointed out by critics- it is incapable of explaining social conflict or particularly the process of fundamental social change. It assumes the existence of an equilibrating mechanism in the systems under study. The systems model in its inability to change sanctions a status quo. Therefore, in any social analysis this may be distorted picture of the reality. To quote Allen:

"Regardless of the type, function or size, student groups are unstable. This is due to the rapidly changing nature of the student population, but also the changing interests of the student themselves...In the last analysis, the transitory nature of the student groups is one of their dominant characteristics and a key element in the understanding of the student community" (Allen , 1975: 42).

The open systems model in spite of its failure to explain the historical truth stands as a more illustrative model to emphasize the interactions between the student movements and the environment and the constraints within which they function.

The Question of Orientations and Ideology:

It has been argued that the university trained 'modern' intellectual has three essential tasks, 'each of which is essential to the process of cultural transformation: s/he mediates new values, s/he formulates an effective ideology, and s/he creates an adequate, collective [national] self-image' (Weber 1946:110-11). These place him/her in direct conflict with the traditionalist forces in his/her nation. Thus one of the central tasks of the study of the social requisites for development is the analysis of the conditions which influence the responses of the intellectuals and university students. It is interesting to note that the late C. Wright Mills, in his more direct concern with facilitating political revolution, also suggested that students and intellectuals, rather than the working class, may be an 'immediate radical agency of change'. As a sociologist, he urged the need 'to study these new generations of intellectuals (including university students) around the world as real live agencies of historic change.'²

In a similar vein, Max Weber in "Politics as a Vocation" observed that youth has a tendency to follow "a pure ethic of absolute ends," while maturity is associated with "an ethic of responsibility." The advocates of the first fear that any compromise on matters of principles will endanger the "salvation of the soul"; the proponent of the second fear that an unwillingness to confront the complex "realities of life" may result in "the goals . . . [being] damaged and discredited for generations, because responsibility for consequences is lacking" (Weber, 1946: 126-127).

² Mills detailed the many actions by university students as key sources of political opposition and denigrated the political potential of the working class. In discussing the politics of students and intellectuals, he called for 'detailed comparative studies of them'.
Hills, C. Wright, *Power, Politics and People* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1963:256-259)

While writing on the social movements in India, M.S.A. Rao argues that ideology is an important component of a social movement that distinguishes it from the general category of movements involving collective mobilizations:

“For example, a student strike involves collective mobilization and is oriented towards change. But in the absence of an ideology, a strike becomes an individual and an isolated event, not a movement. On the contrary, if a strike is organized by a student organization with a defined ideology, it becomes an event in that student movement” (Rao, 1979: 2).

The emergence of the student community as a new force, within an environment serving as a stimulus for student movements offers a possibility for understanding the occurrence of various types of student activism in Assam. The types of operation may be classified as Smelser had done into ‘norm-oriented and value-oriented movements’ (Smelser, 1962: 275). Norm oriented student movements are generally defined as being concerned with a specific grievance or goal, and not having a broader ideological overtone. On the other hand, the value oriented movements are concerned with broader ideological issues and their involvement in concerted actions and activities are directly linked to the broader concern.

Altbach however points out that while norm and value orientation offer some useful models for the study of student movements, student movements often do not function within the tight compartmentalism of either category (Altbach, 1967: 12).

In a review of student agitation all over India, the cases of Gujarat and Bihar, for example, clearly show that at certain historical times, student movements that began as norm-oriented eventually transformed into value orientation. These distinctions are helpful for two reasons. Firstly, as they serve as a valuable tool in understanding a specific student movement and secondly as student movements have the potential to manifest different orientations over a period time. Hence, in studying student movements in Assam for the entire span of almost a century, the classification of issues may be extremely helpful although in most cases we find the overlapping of the two, or one followed by the other in succession.

Although generalizations to the student movements cannot be inferred, since situation and conditions that give rise to such movements or agitations vary across time and space, a general and comparative study of the student movements all over the world is essential for understanding the nature and character of a particular student movement.

In the developed countries student movements have often been described as a form of adjustment to conditions brought about by the new affluence. While the conditions are contrary-the reverse of affluence in the developing countries, student movements could still be explained as forms of adjustment to changes brought about by transformation of a traditional life to modernity.

Michener identifies a tendency of student movements towards violence in both affluent and developing nations arising out of political in the country(Michener, 1957: 59). In fact the study of the student movements of the Brahmaputra valley in the colonial period exposes two-conflicting tendencies. While the general tendency is to opt for non-violence there is a simultaneous and obvious tendency towards violence.

Meeta Deka points out the significance of student-worker alliance in the history student movements in Assam which later developed into a tradition at particular phases of student movements in the state (Deka, 1996: 231). This trend evidenced in the highly industrialized countries of Germany and France, has also been identifiable in Assam, from the late 1930's onwards.

In a different, but nonetheless relevant context of Sussex , Great Britain, Joseph Newman puts forth that the mobilization of student movements in Great Britain has been chiefly over issues in 'which the liberal idea contradicted the technocratic reality'. He points out that the student movements at Essex uncovered the "the circumscribed limits within which Bourgeois tolerance and free speech operate"; as well as "the limits imposed by meritocratic rationale on effective student participation, a rationale whose norms and measures cannot be questioned" (Newman, 1969:13-14).

A broader orientation of student movements in India, requires examination of their historical roots that can be traced to their relationship with the larger political protest demonstrations that transformed India from colonialism to democracy.

As will be elaborated in the following chapter student protest in Assam has some significant additional context to them. As pointed out by Meeta Deka, the geo-political history of Assam and its environmental influence makes the history of student protest in Assam a unique (Deka, 1996: 232-233). It will also be discussed that the student politics in the state is essentially moved by the internal dynamics of the nationality formation processes in the state.

Site for articulation of student movements:

The Academic Environment:

It has been noted that although students are generally concerned about societal politics, the institutional milieu does play a significant role. Universities have unique cultures, histories and practices that contribute to student's political consciousness and concern (Altbach, 1972 ; van den Berghe, 1973).

A significant factor is also the freedom that university students experience from their familial structures. Further, in many countries, the subculture of the university (and of intellectuals generally) is most often an 'oppositional' subculture, which examines carefully and critically the society of which it is a part (Shils, 1972: 50). Shils also argues that the professoriate often adds to the sense of intellectual ferment by encouraging students to ask difficult questions and, in some instances, by displaying oppositional political and social views. The campus community is more cosmopolitan than its surrounding society and inevitably comes into some conflict with it. Although, student populations tend to come from relatively privileged strata of the population, they relatively have greater opportunities to interact with compeers from different social strata. The meritocratic atmosphere of the university renders, the traditional barriers of caste, ethnicity, tribe and religion seem less important in (Ibid: 56).

The ethos of the university community provides fertile space for interest in social and political questions. It thereby becomes easier to express these interests and to organize for political discussions and actions. The university, in almost all countries, is prevailed by a more autonomous, independent and liberal environment than its surrounding

society. Student activism is often able to flourish in the confusing middle ground between freedom and conformity.

As Martin Lipset says:

“In a few countries, campus issues and conditions stimulate student activism and this activism sometimes spills from the campus to the society. The most dramatic example of campus-based activism is India, where poor and often deteriorating conditions, combined with an interest by external political groups in campus politics, often stimulate activism. The combination of a tradition of local student politics, external interests, and deteriorating conditions in the universities are a powerful one. While India is almost unique in the scope and intensity of local student activism, campus conditions can contribute to student activism and to a generalized feeling of disaffection among students throughout the Third World” (Lipset, 1967: 55).

John Friedman argues that the ‘modern’ intellectuals as the nascent student class, must be placed alongside those directly concerned with economic innovation as the principal agents of social change and economic growth. "The one is active in the realm of values and ideas, the other in the realm of technology and organisation. But the actions of both will tend to undermine the established order of things" (Friedman, 1964: 514).

Student Politics in the Developing Countries:

It is significant to reflect on the differences between student political activism in the Third World and in the industrialized nations because such a comparison yields some useful insights. At this juncture it is imperative to have an awareness of the substantial debate that emerged in the decades of the 1960s onwards in the various sub-disciplines of Social-Sciences regarding the nature of differences between students as a social category. These positions also strongly bring out the peculiarities in the case of Assam, as it does not fit into most of these theorizations. Though most of these formulations need to be significantly revised with the substantial political transformations taking place and attainment of widespread political maturity of the post-colonial, third-world

societies, these characterisations provide the very basic context for the emergence of the student activism in these societies.

The tasks of the universities in the underdeveloped countries of the world do not fundamentally differ from what they are in developed societies. Both must transmit in a more differentiated and more specific way the cultural heritage -the history, the scientific knowledge, the literature-of their society and of the world culture; they must train persons who will become members of the elites of their societies to exercise skills in science, technology, management and administration; they must cultivate the capacity for leadership and a sense of responsibility to their fellow countrymen and they must train them to be constructively critical, to be able to initiate changes while appreciating what they have inherited.

In the developing countries the institutions such as the family, religion and school, through which young men and women have to pass before they enter the university, are usually concerned with transmitting the culture already accepted by the elders. An approximately similar situation exists even in "modern" societies but the situation is much more acute in societies in which most of the older generation lives in a traditional indigenous culture much different from the culture the young person encounters in his contacts with the modern sectors. The resulting hostility against the efforts of authority to impose on him a culture which he is unsympathetic to disposes him to accept an anti-authoritarian political culture once he becomes interested in political issues (Mannheim, 1956: 163-164). However, in the underdeveloped countries, the role of the universities is especially important because the elites of the modern sector of the society are drawn very largely from the reservoir of persons with university training.

Thus the universities have the task of producing not only much of the elite who must modernise the society, but they are also almost solely responsible for the conduct of intellectual life in general. A substantial proportion of the political elite, too, is bound to emerge from the ranks of university graduates, even in times of populist politics (Altbach, 1967: 25-27). In this context, it is interesting to observers what Chattopadhyay points out in the case of Assam, "the founding of the Gauhati University led to an increasing student population and the simultaneous growth of the Assamese middle-

class as the society's backbone" (Chattopadhyay, 1990: 156). Moreover, in the case of Assam the modernizing role of the higher educational institutions mediates through the complex identity matrix. This point will be further elaborated in the following chapter.

Highlighting some of the reasons why the student movements in the Third World have been more successful in affecting political change, scholars like Soares and Altbach (Soares, 1964; Altbach, 1984,) point out some features of Third World student activism. These can be summed up as follows,

Firstly, Third World nations often lack established political institutions and structures of the industrialized nations. This makes it easier for any organized group, such as the student community, to have a direct impact on politics.

Relatively few Third World nations have effectively functioning democratic political systems. Due to the widespread problems of illiteracy and poor communications, students are often seen as spokespersons for a broader population. They have, in a sense, moral authority beyond their small numbers which induces those in power to take student demonstrations and grievances seriously. In a sense, Third World students act as a "conscience" of their societies.

Also as pointed out by Altbach (*ibid*: 113) it is the location of the major universities in many Third World nations in the capital cities that makes access to the seat of political power easier. The simple fact of geography makes demonstrations easier to organize and gives the students a sense of being closer and capable of accessing the centers of power.

In the underdeveloped countries, university students do not just prepare themselves for future roles in public life but they play a significant part in the political life of their countries even during their student period. The critical attitude of the educated strata in the emerging post-colonial countries, reflect their concern, from a nationalist standpoint, for the modernisation of their country. (Lipset, 1964; Fromme, 1966, Altbach 1964, 1967, 1971). Moreover, the historical tradition of students' political involvement is strong and contributes to the creation of a sense of legitimacy for their political involvement in the Third World. While in the West, student political involvement is seen as an aberration and an illegitimate intrusion into politics, students in many countries of the Third World, are expected to participate directly in politics. Further, third World

students are much more of an elite group than their compeers in the industrial nations and they have a consciousness of their elite position. And as members of the small minority having access to post-secondary education their opportunities for access to positions of power and authority in society are much enhanced.

From Third World to India:

In India, student participation in the anti-colonial struggle was viewed with considerable legitimacy in the first half of this century. In fact, most of the political leaders in independent India were students leaders of their times. With the arrival of independence all the political parties invoked the dictum 'catch them young' through student associations affiliated to them.

The time of Indian independence, was characterized by an unquestioned acceptance of the dynamic link between universities and modernization. As such substantial financial outlays were allocated to higher education in the initial Five-Year Plans. Of the sum reserved for education, in the Third Plan 20 per cent was designated for higher education despite the disproportionately small number of students involved. In 1965/66 primary to secondary enrollments (ages 6-17) totaled 64 million while all university enrollment was slightly over one million (Shah,2004: 111).

In this context, Joseph Bona maintains that incongruency in the universities and the needs of the economy leads to stress of which indiscipline is but the symptom (Bona, 1966: 78).

The factional nature of state and local politics in India, have often led to the universities have becoming the battlegrounds for caste or regional alignments. Many elections for campus office have implications for the larger political struggle going on in the state legislature.

Significant here is to quote a few lines from a certain report of the Central Advisory Board of Education, 1960, constituted by the Government of India, to look into the matter of 'politicisation' of Indian campuses.

“With regard to the politicians who exploit the students for political ends we have no remedy except to appeal to their conscience. A suggestion has been made that we should call a conference of the leaders of all political parties and come to a gentlemen’s agreement not to exploit the students for political ends. From our past experience I am not hopeful of any satisfactory solution coming out of this conference since there are some political parties and groups, which thrive on students’ unrest and agitation. The real remedy lies only in greater vigilance on the part of parents and guardians and in creating a healthy public opinion against the exploitation of immature students by political parties for their selfish ends” (CABE, Survey of the Education Scenario, 1961: 45).

Sociologist T.K. Oomen has explained increasing activism on the part of the youth-students in the light of the intensification of urbanization. The spread of higher education and the consequent occupational diversification led to spatial mobility and the subsequent demand for more freedom by the two traditionally subservient segments in the family-the women and the youth. Accelerated by social and ideational mobility the growth of individualism among them became a source of inter-generational conflict. (Oomen T.K,2002: 184). Youth protest, in fact, was a world phenomenon in the 1960s and its reverberations were felt in India too in the form of widespread unrest among college students. “If *Swaraj* was the main motive force of the Indian youth in the 1930s, ‘nation building’, seen in terms of participation in politics, professions, and the bureaucracy, was the propelling force in the first three decades (1959-1980) of free India. With the onset of the globalization and liberalization of the economy ‘nation-building’ is perceived primarily as creation of wealth. Thus, there was a considerable shift in the value orientations of the Indian youth which was reflected also in their lifestyles by the 1990s. However, these shifts /changes in the value orientations were/ are not entirely shared by the older generations and are in fact an important source of inter-generational conflict.” (Ibid: 185).

However, for our research, issues of student unrest is contextualised in the political processes of the Nation-State; issues of identity; rights, and communitarian formations and their linkages with wider political institutions.

The Political Framework:

University students act as one of the most mobilized and politically articulate groups in society. In the Third World, students are a uniquely mobilizable group. Students see themselves as a kind of "incipient elite" destined for power and responsible for exercising their political power even while students (Hanna and Hanna, 1975.)

Many Third World societies are multi-ethnic, and this presents further possibilities for unrest and contestation. Many of these pressing societal questions directly affect the student population. Language policy, for example, often has implications for the medium of instruction in the educational system. Variations in the treatment of ethnic groups also affect student populations.. Ideological interests come from a variety of sources, including the Nature of university education and the psychological propensities of students. The ideological orientations of student groups have broad political implications.

It has often been said that student movements constitute something of a 'conscience' for their societies, as they often embody the concerns of broader segments of the population who are unable to voice their discontent. Students are often more ideologically aware and oriented than the population generally. The reaction of the political system to student activist movements contributes significantly towards shaping their actions, orientations and, of course, the impact they have on society (Keniston, 1971; Klineberg, 1979). As such there are many reasons for the close relationship between students and the political system.

It would be tempting to develop or posit a hypothesis that the more democratic and civil libertarian a regime is in the Third World, the more likely it is to permit a fairly high level of activism. In general, this seems to be the case, although political currents change so rapidly that activism can become a risky business very quickly

Historical Traditions

Historical circumstances and traditions have also shape the nature and scope of student activism in a national context. Perhaps the most important difference in this regard

between the industrialized nations and the Third World is the role played by the academic community in general, and students particularly, in independence struggles in many of the Third World nations. This key political role has legitimated the participation of students in national politics (Altbach, 1982, Lelyveld, 1978). Because students participated in the national struggles, they have achieved a place in history and their contemporary political role is considered legitimate. Governments have attempted to lessen this legitimacy, but it remains a powerful force. If students are somehow expected to play a political role, their actions and opinions carry a greater weight. In the Third World generally, students, as representatives of the middle classes, have been expected to play an active political role. Students have historically been involved in cultural and linguistic reform movements, and have been important also in shaping the cultural traditions of the modern period. Historically, the universities have been important places of cultural ferment and debate. This is not surprising considering the small size of the intellectual class in most Third World nations prior to the growth of modern universities in the post-independence period. When the history of the growth of nationalism and of cultural ferment is written in many Third World nations, the academic community - both students and faculty - emerge as an important force. Historical traditions function in different ways in different countries. In some, there was direct student involvement in the independence struggle. In others, students played an intellectual and cultural rather than a political role. In the case of India, the students agitation in the platform of anti-colonial struggle was also significantly influenced by ideas of internationalism.

Sociological Currents

Student politics, even in the most troubled environment, is almost always a minority phenomenon - majority of students do not participate in student movements. In order to understand student activism, it is useful to consider some of the sociological variables that seem to affect activism.

Much has been written about Third World university students as 'elites' either present or future. It is almost universally true that university students come from the upper strata of societies in almost every Third World society. Further, student populations tend to be

largely 'urban' in countries that are predominantly rural. Student populations in many instances contain disproportionate numbers of young people from minority groups which happen to have a tradition of education or have achieved a level of affluence. Thus, student populations often differ significantly from the general population in the Third World.

In the Third World, the gulf between reality and a desired social goal is often wide, leading students to question the efficacy of existing political arrangements.

Social class, religion, and ethnic group may also play a role in shaping activist movements. The relationship between the student and the university is also important. Thus, to understand student activism, it is important to understand both the institutional and the sociological context, and perhaps the psychological issues related to activism

Section two

Student Politics in Assam

Taking History as a Framework:

A historian writing on the role of students in the student movement of the 1970s in Assam observes:

“These various students behaved like the adult chauvinist parties. Thus, the political demand cannot be equated with the normal academic demand of students' unions. In other parts of India such as West Bengal, state level student organisations concern themselves primarily with academic issues such as admission of students, holding of examinations (with emphasis on postponement), appointment, removal or transfer of teachers, syllabi/curricula, assurance of jobs at the end of academic life, student participation in the administration of colleges and universities and campus politicking on” (Chattopadhyay,1990: 140).

Historically, uninformed and subjectively biased assertions of this kind necessitate the crucial importance for developing a sensitive perspective of political history for analysing the politics of student movements in Assam.

History if understood in its totality, probably gives us ample evidence to show that the ethnic volatility and the nature of ethnic coalition in Assam is much more rooted in its peculiar past, than is assumed. It would thus only be rational to argue that the formations of student groups in an ethnically charged situation like Assam, need to be understood as rooted in this history.

The state policies of the Ahom monarchy, facilitated retention of tribal pockets in the heartland of Assam, through which tribes retained their distinct language and culture. Economically the situation paved the way for exclusion of 'Tribals' from plough-based agriculture (Dutta , 1993: 26.)

As such the process of 'conversion' of tribal people did not operate here and even in the heartland of Assam 'tribal' people continued their existence outside the Brahminical fold away from the culture-frame of Plough-based system of production. Thus the Indian variety of feudalism of that period operated in Assam only at the super-structural level. Its orbit excluded the most numerous sections of the indigenous population. This proved to be a weak point at the very starting point of Assamese nationality formation process. In a sense there was no 'feudalism from below' and belated attempts by the Ahom monarchy at 'feudalism from above' eventually ruined the monarchy (Guha, 1976: 80-92.). As result, when colonialism and with it the modern education came, there was no ready-made middle-class to appropriate these changes. Students fulfilled this role of an incipient middle-class and harbinger of modernity in Assam. The major contribution of this middle-class was that they could provide a definite direction to their identity through articulations in tune with the changed rationale-legal framework. This historical truth is the essential factor responsible for according an influential role in the dynamics of community formation, to the student's class in Assam. Therefore a chief feature of the student movements in Assam lies in its attainment of organizational maturity and the subsequent formation of a well-knit structure. Tracing its initiation in the *Asom Bhasar Unnoti Sadhini Sabha* at Calcutta in 1985 the organizational structure developed into one

that came to be a well established precursor to the success of subsequent student led mass movements.

The coming chapters will discuss the expanding body of students who came to be recognized as the most important segment of the new social space favourable to the growth of Assamese nationalist/subnationalist politics in the post-independence years.

The Question of Class- Character of Student Movements: The Case of Assam.

Do the students as a social category assume a 'class-like status' in a particular moment of history or do they work merely as the influential arm of the hegemonic class?

In the Indian context, Mehta (Mehta 1975: 14) studies student movements as a process of social change in which student organisations are assuming all features of a new social class. This understanding of a class centers on the notion of a conflict group consisting of people with a common interest rather than the Marxist sense of class formation along the lines of property relations.

Manorama Sharma analysing the history of student movement in Assam, observes that the 'Assam Chatra Sammilan' (Assam students' Association) , the first and for a considerable amount of time the foremost students' organization of the state 'was the most articulate exponent of the middle class ideology' (Sharma, 2002: 65.)

This observation reveals the existence of a close relationship between the students in Assam and the middle-class, from the very first stages of crystallisation of student power in the region. However, the matter of contestation is whether the relationship is one of domination, subordination or mutual co-operation?

Scholars like A.K. Baruah, academically engaging with student movements in Assam, would like to explain this relationship between the two as one regulated by the exercise of hegemony, a concept developed by Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. He states, "By hegemony of the dominant classes in civil society Gramsci meant their ideological predominance over the subordinate classes" (Baruah,2002: 16).

"More than any other sections of the society, the students as receptive members of the intelligentsia, and as persons constantly engaged in studies are greatly

exposed to this hegemony. This hegemonic position is not synonymous with the governing fraction, which staffs the top levels of the state apparatus, or the groups, which elaborate and reproduce dominant ideology. Nor should it be located in those groups which visibly exercise political and ideological leadership in society but rather in the effects of dominant forms of political and ideological practice, the particular social relations they reproduce. *It would therefore be necessary in the study of student movements not merely to locate the class which apparently rules but to locate the class or the combination of classes which exercises hegemony in that particular society at that particular phase of history*" (Baruah, 2002:16-17) (emphasis mine).

Thus the mental make up of the students irrespective of their class backgrounds is informed by a uniform middle-class ethos. There takes place an institutional entitlement of middle-class ethos through academic enrollments and a subsequent integration into the ranks of middle-class. Significantly the students become both the targets and purveyors of middle class hegemony, as they carry forward their hegemonised ethos to other sections of the society.

However, S.K. Das contends this view on three grounds.

First, in a relatively backward state like Assam, representation from backward sections of the population in the institutions of higher education was likely to be insignificant. Hence the probability of their being integrated and accommodated into the ranks of the middle class was much lower. So the reason student groups in Assam manifested middle-class ethos, was more due to its middle-class composition itself.

Second, in the light of the fact that the roles of the educational institutions were severely marginalised during the course of the Assam movement, due to rampant closure, "the fact of their being constantly engaged in studies should not be exaggerated while appreciating the role of their studies in sparking off and penetrating the movement. The formal education system was in utter disarray. It did not provide an ideal setting for fermentation of ideas necessary for the evolution of a generic middle class ethos".

Third, "the student leaders joined the movement not because their educational institutions had taught them to do so, although there were many teachers who were

closely associated with the movement, but because the movement was such that it could not effectively transcribe itself into the generic middle-class ethos or what I would like to designate as the normative consensus of the society and catch their imagination. Hence what Lipset calls, 'academic ecology' has little to do with the consensus or ethos that embraced not only the students but also many others who incidentally were not students" (Das S.K, 2002:137.)

With a Marxist analysis of class formation in Assam, Amalendu Guha considers the students in Assam of composing a significant part of the petty bourgeoisie class in the state. "The agitation was started by the Asamiya capitalists and the gentry through the communication media they control, and the students and other sections of the petty bourgeoisie including sections of peasants were gradually drawn to it" (Guha, 2006: 105). Also the fact that " had it been started by the students by themselves, the agitation would have still remained a bourgeois (or middle class) movement in essence by virtue of the logic of substitutism or because of its ideological roots in that class" (ibid: 194). However the leading role taken by the small capitalists in Assam, with gentry characteristics make Guha characterise the students as a nascent bourgeoisie formation with an expansive middle-class mentality.

This debate on the issue of class character reflects, in essence , the ample complexities involved in the student politics in the state.

Some trends of student activism in Assam:

Before delving into the history and development of student movements in of sthe general trends within the various students groups in Assam.

Niru Hazarika (Hazarika Niru, 1998: XV), while profiling the youth organizations in North-East India, points the following broad conditions preparing the ground for student activism in Assam.

1. The deep rooted feeling of negligence, deprivation, exploitation and the sense of insecurity.
2. Persistence problems relating to land, language and employment issues.

3. Manipulations of youths by the political parties to gain power.
4. Poor analysis and evaluation of government policies as well as lethargic administrative response in the said context.
5. Dysfunctions of the institutions like family, educational institutions, political parties, administrative departments.

These broad points present the, 'general' context of student politics in Assam. However, it does not say much about the particular orientation or the prominent nature that the student movements have assumed. For this purpose emphasis has to be laid on a few 'specific' contexts, that have influenced the modus operandi of the student groups in Assam.

- a) The multi-ethnic nature of the polity and society in Assam.
- b) The sharpening of inter-ethnic competition for resources, due to a synergistic interaction between processes of modernization and ethnisation in the region.
- c) The manipulation of the ethnic-coalition by the state-elites, both at the state and centre level to dominate the development agenda in a manner subservient to the dominant interests.

These three points will be taken up for detailed scrutiny in the next chapter which will also provide with an analysis of the flow of history, with all its inherent mediation and manipulation. This is essential for understanding the social reality in all its manifestations and implications.

As of now one can surmise that Student politics in Assam becomes a sphere where the ethnically divided youth try to voice claims for rights, specific to the groups and communities they belong to and represent. It is argued that Ethnic communities dominate the agenda of rights in Assam (the North-East) to the point of making the rights claims reflect the inter-community divisions and conflicts. (Das, 2003). The youth leaders while making the rights claims project their community as an 'end to itself regardless to its status as a means to any other end'(Parsons, 1949: 75). Also the rights are claimed on the ground that they reflect the 'normative consensus' of the community. The community not only informs the agenda of the right but makes the agenda apparent and self-evident

to the point of making it non-negotiable. The agenda is coupled as it were with an injunction that 'future actions conform to this course'. Since the rights appear as non-negotiable, it is always for the ethnic other to decide what they are going to do and how they want to interact with them.

Viewed in this light, the agendas of the rights harbored and put across by various students' organizations operating in the state look almost alike and contain many a common feature. The issue to explore here, is whether student movements are devoid of individual rights and driven only by community rights?

Exploring the relevant Approach:

My research approaches the evolution of student movements in Assam from the perspective of the dynamic process of community formation in Assam. I will argue that the presence of a particular socio-political set up due to specific socio-historical evolution over the years, enables the politics of student movement to become an influential agency of social transformation. This has to be explained referring to two different frameworks: the Marxian framework of Hegemony articulated by Antonio Gramsci and the model of normative consensus of the society as forwarded by structural functionalist sociology.

It can be argued that the course of various student movements in Assam from its early inception in the beginning decades of the twentieth century is an expression of contested drives of various ethnic groups and social classes of the region to hegemonize the community space and thereby define and redefine the very parameters of the 'Assamese' community. This also enabled these processes to predominate over the normative consensus of the transitional society of Assam.

One can thus observe the historical ascendance of Assamese middle-class through assertion of students politics throughout the decades of the fifties and the sixties and culminating in the powerful Assam movement spearheaded by the All Assam Students Movements (AASU), where the movement did succeed to achieve a 'unity of purpose' between various sections or communities in the state by articulating a cultural space that

was shared by various components of the political block as a forum for mutually intelligible communication and interaction. However, it was this same value consensus of the society in Assam at that point of time that resisted the attempted 'combative' hegemonic drive by the middle-class through student organizations. The normative understanding and consensus within various contesting components of the community, determined the nature of the movement - polysonic one addressing itself to a multiplicity of interests, a 'liminal event' through which the society impresses its form on its members irrespective of their status differences and generates a consensus. The hegemonising agenda of the student movement of the 70s and 80s has proved counter-productive to consolidating the middle-class hegemony in Assam and has led to further ruptures in the shared normative consensus of the society by highlighting many a fault lines. Infact, with Assam Movement the limits of a 'majoritarian' middle-class politics in Assam strongly came to the fore. And the more the student leadership became coercive in the face of critiques and challenges from different sections and classes from within the community, the more they deviated from the Gramscian route of hegemony (Das, 2002: 132-135).

As we will analyse in the next few chapters, it is interesting to observe that the last two decades subsequent to the long lasting Assam movement have witnessed considerable mobilization against the culturally and politically essentialising and hegemonising drive by the Assamese middle-class being pushed through student bodies. Perhaps the first big challenge came from the breakaway section of the students involved strongly in the Assam movement forming the outfit United Liberation Front of Assam with secessionist aims. It is significant to notice that, in sharp contrast to AASU, organizationally, students organizations with a predominant rural base like '*Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad*' (a strong participant of the Assam Movement) and various students organisations espoused by different groups of ethnic minorities stand in a relatively closer proximity with the systemic critique of the Indian state offered by secessionist groups like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), if not its adopted means, as evident by their forming unified-umbrella platforms in solidarity, time and again.

The Framework: Students as Subjects or Objects of History?

From our perspective of viewing students as agents of identity formation in Assam we will now try to discern some central questions that emerge out of this survey of different approaches,

One, do the students as a social category dominated by unequal power relations, act as mere objects of history, merely as a resource group subservient to other organised social-political groups and classes like political parties, middle-classes, trade unions etc.?

Two, or do the students act as active subjects of history? Can we find situations in history wherein their unity with other social groups and classes by either absorbing or neutralizing their interests³ has enabled them with a potential to effect social change? Does this process of enabling present a case of higher unity conducive to the interests of the student as a social hegemonic class?

Three, in a situation like Assam marked by contending issues of ‘unity of community’ and multi-ethnic resurgence, do the students affect social change, by merely upholding the shared ‘normative consensus’ prevailing in the society at a particular time or does their domination in the social sphere signify only a politics of consensual domination?

The first position denies student movements any instrumental agency of change within a given social block, the second assigns it with positions of potential hegemony within it while the third position talks of the agency rested in students conditioned and regulated by structural patterns of the society concerned.

The situation of the debates in the case of Assam, exposes the stark dimension of the relationship that obtains between the question of autonomous agency of student movement (with all its class and identity-characteristics) and that of its institutionalization. In the sections that follow we will present the case of Assam movement and the subsequent attempts of institutionalising dominant student movements of the state a clear case in sight.

³ Instances of ‘expansive’ and ‘subversive’ hegemony as put forth by Laclau Ernesto and C Mouffe (1985, p.192).

Thus the observations on Assam, makes one reflect on the questions of social rootedness of the student movements and highlights the significant congruence of different markers of social mobilisation like nationalism, ethnicity, tribe with that of class in the platform of such movements. In this light one can examine the role accorded to student movements as vehicle of social mobilization and identity formation, .in a transitional, multi-ethnic society like that of Assam.

In the next chapter, we contextualise the evolution of student politics in Assam and argue that it is marked by an inter-play of some prominent conceptual categories that distinguishes student politics in the state with a unique transformative capacity.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXTUALISING STUDENT POLITICS IN ASSAM: ANALYSING ITS GROWTH

Any meaningful study on the politics of student movements in general and Assam in particular needs to be placed in the overarching backdrop of the politics of ‘community building’ and nationality formation processes through some key conceptual tools like nationalism, ethnicity and identity. The present chapter seeks to develop some theoretical arguments by interrogating the following two conceptual phenomena and then foregrounding their operationalisation in the context of the student politics in Assam.

- Issues of ethnicity and the politics of identity in Assam.
- Assamese nationalism and the process of Assamese nationality building.

Section one

Issues of Ethnicity and the Politics of Identity in Assam

A. On Ethnicity: Some Theorisations on the Ethnic Group Relations in Assam:

Max Weber argues that certain characteristics that are primarily objective in nature such as religion, language, customs or physical appearances are basic for distinguishing one ethnic group from another, and from other delimiting categories like race or class.

Ethnicity is a socially defined, inclusive category that is in part dependent on some combination of these characteristics to set the parameters of ethnic identity and membership. Integral to establishing an ethnic identity are individuals who share ‘feelings of common ethnicity and notions of kinship’ (Weber, 1978: 392) that are

embodied in 'perceptible differences in the conduct of everyday life.' This recognition, according to Weber, is not dependent on the objective reality of a 'blood relationship', but rather can only be determined on the basis of a subjective belief (Ibid: 389). In addition, there must be at least two groups with distinguishable social or cultural characteristics that enable monopolistic closure of group boundaries. Otherwise, ethnic divisions cannot be established. In short, one of the two groups must perceive itself as different from the other and act on that perception by establishing criteria for membership (ibid: 390).

Important for Weber's understanding of ethnicity is the link between economic and political conditions and the manifestation of ethnicity. He explains that "feelings of common ethnicity and notions of kinship, are usually caused ...by the diverse economic and political conditions of various groups" and that "it is primarily the political community....that inspires the belief in common ethnicity". The roles of 'differences in the economic way of life' are fundamental to shaping 'the belief in ethnic affinity'(ibid: 389-391) Economic and political factors then are crucial variables in determining the nature of ethnic relations.

To summarize, we understand ethnicity to result from a subjective recognition and acknowledgement of a set of interconnected social markers such as language, religion, historical experience, or shared institutions that are intertwined with a common cultural foundation. One or more of these characteristics is sufficient to distinguish an ethnic group from other groups and the specific characteristics of a given ethnic identity are determined by the historical and cultural context in which they are embedded. Culture is a critical feature of ethnicity because it provides a framework in which the political and economic conditions take on their 'ethnic meaning'. Otherwise, the objective qualities associated with a particular ethnic group would be defining features of Nationalism, class, or some other socially determined category.

Conflict in Assam, however, is not the outcome with political and economic underpinnings alone, but is also shaped by concerns about cultural issues. However often in ethnic studies cultures have been reduced to a set of descriptive variables or markers which are used to identify objective characteristics of an ethnic group. 'Culture and

cultural relations are seen as passive aspects of ethnic studies that are either linked to external forces or are the basis of the social fabric that bind an ethnic group together' (Darnell and Parikh, 1988: 263-279).

Culture should be a more active component in understanding ethnicity, because culture, in conjunction with an ethnic group's subjective recognition of its ethnic distinctiveness, is a critical component in giving meaning to the more objective attributes of ethnicity. Culture and cultural patterns, in this framework, "are sets of symbols whose relations to one another 'model' relations among entities, processes, or what-have-you in...social...systems" (Geertz, 1973: 93). Culture provides the medium through which the symbols, history, modes of communication, community perceptions, and attitudes of the members of a group share the (ethnic) group's life experiences. Because of the complex relationship that results between cultures and experience, culture and cultural patterns 'give meaning, that is objective conceptual form, to the social and psychological reality by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves' (ibid: 95).

We can find several studies that have adopted a more central role for the concept of culture in their formulations of ethnicity. In this approach ethnicity is both something to be explained and something that can explain (Turner and Singleton 1978, Comaroff 1984; Cornell 1985). Comaroff, for example, argues that after ethnicity is constituted and possesses identifiable cultural markers it must ultimately be 'represented "as the independent variable" that shapes and constraints careers and biographies'. Once at this stage of reality, ethnicity can (order) 'social status, class membership, and so on' (Comaroff, 1984: 15).

B. Different Approaches to Study Ethnic Conflict in Assam:

One can here briefly discuss the different approaches to study ethnic conflicts in Assam. These approaches help to explain the political dimensions of conflict in Assam. Indeed, one of the central point in different inter-ethnic conflict in the state and the Assamese-Bengali conflicts in 1960-70s and thereafter has been the allocation of the scarce government and private sector jobs. A substantial amount of Assamese political mobilisation in the 1960-70s was hinged around demanding preferential treatment for the

‘sons of the soil’ in employment and education. (Notwithstanding the later year’s controversy regarding the definition of the son of the soil, this logic of ethnisation only spreads across smaller ethnic group of the state)

Our focus is on the following approaches :

The split labour market theory, hypothesises that ‘ethnic antagonism first germinates in labour markets split along ethnic lines (and) to be split, a labour market must contain at least two groups of workers whose price of labour differs for the same work, or would differ if they do the same work’ (. Bonacich, 1972: 549). Subsequently, the emphasis is placed on ethnic conflict and the relationship between the ethnic group and class.

Alfred T Darnell and Sunita Parikh (Darnell and Parikh, 1998: 265-266) point out the several grounds on which the split labour market model of ethnisation is only very partially applicable in situations like Assam.

First, the key assumption of this model is the existence of an over-supply of labour, a condition of the advanced industrial societies. In Assam, however, there has historically been an undersupply of labour, and several emigrant ethnic groups have been brought in to fill labour shortages, arising out of the needs of early colonial industrialization.

Second, another key assumption of the model that does not apply to Assam is the interchangeability of ethnic groups of a given labour market. This condition does not hold in Assam because competition for positions in the organized sector was not shaped wholly by economic factors. Instead, the Bengalis secured a majority of the status positions because they were more easily able to adapt to British requirements than the Assamese. Thus the Bengalis ‘won’ the labour competition because of colonial patronage, not because they were a cheaper labour supply. The same goes for the caste Assamese enjoying cultural-linguistic privileges in the labour market vis.a vis the tribal groups.

Third, the assumption that the political weakness of the ethnic groups forces them to accede to the industry’s demands is not readily applicable in Assam. In the Bengali-Assamese case, however, both groups have political power. Through their control of legislative politics in the state of Assam, the Assamese have been able to implement job

qualifications giving themselves an advantage over the Bengalis. At the same time size and influence of the Bengali immigrants electorally and bureaucratically, have made them influential in state policies.

However, this assumption holds partly true in the case of the tribal and non-caste groups in the state, who inspite of having tried to make use of the various avenues of political power made available by the law of the land remain politically weaker.

Another approach, based on theory of segregated labour market, emphasizes the ethnic groups' ability to establish and maintain its principal economic relations with members of the same ethnic group. This approach argues that 'immigrant enterprises might manage to create a workable form of vertical integration by developing ethnically sympathetic sources of supply and consumer outlets' which enables them to create and maintain control over their development (Wilson and Portes, 1980: 301-02). 'Ethnic enclaves', then, provide a haven for the enduring saliency of ethnic identity.

Control in the economic sector, particularly with respect to labour relations, is the principal source of domination. Political domination serves to assure economic control and superiority. Though ethnic groups in Assam, particularly the ethnic Assamese and the Bengalis, are able to dominate certain sectors of the economy, they do not integrate vertically to maintain control over their development. A more common pattern observed is for an ethnic group to monopolise a particular aspect of the economy and make all other groups dependent on it, such as the Marwari community monopolising money lending in the state. This behaviour does increase the salience of ethnic identity, but not through vertical integration; instead, it makes ethnic and material interests congruent. Thus the smaller ethnic groups in Assam are economically homogenous, contrary to the assumption of the theory.

Internal colonialism is the third approach that places a stress on economic relationships to understand ethnic conflicts. This approach emphasizes the economic and political subordination of one group to another (Blauner, 1970; Hechter, 1975).

Among the three models discussed above, Darnell and Parikh find the internal colonialism model, more apt in understanding the case of Assam as it provides a

framework for examining the role of the state and the friction existent between the ethnic Assamese and the Central Government.

However, this model assumes a highly stratified society in which ethnicity is relegated to 'the bottom layers of the society'. This condition however, does not hold in Assam where the distribution of labour and the monopoly of occupational and economic sectors by specific ethnic groups are not necessarily confined to one class. Moreover, internal colonialism model promotes an image of the state as an impregnable body that does not have to worry about retaining its position of dominance.

Variables Related to Political Processes:

Ethnic mobilization approach (Adam, 1979; Despres, 1975; Nagel 1984; Olzak 1983), argues that ethnic mobilization is facilitated by 'political structural arrangements and policies (which) promote ethnic mobilisation' and 'provide the rationale for the selection of ethnicity as the basis for mobilization and designation the particular boundaries along which mobilization most likely occurs' (Nagel, 1984: 25-6). The ethnic-government relations approach (Brass 1985, Enloe 1980, young 1986) emphasizes the role of the state and those political organizations, internal and external to ethnic groups, which influence ethnic identity formation and political mobilisation.

Central to both positions is the assumption of competition between different groups for political and economic resources. Indeed, competition for scarce resources has been advanced by some as the critical determinant in the formation and reproduction of ethnic groups (Despres, 1975.) Even when political mobilisation and relations are emphasized they are typically placed within a conceptual framework that posits the causal preeminence of economic factors. Hence, 'sectoral labour distributions, economic differentiation, levels of industrial development and standard of living indices' are variables that provide the context within which ethnic relations and mobilization are embedded (Nagel, 1984: 8).

The Role of the State:

Forces outside of ethnic groups have enormous potential to influence, directly or indirectly, the basic elements of an ethnic group such as its perpetuation, livelihood, and actions. Perhaps the most influential external force on ethnic groups and ethnicity in modern times is the state. The role of official policies in creating a political culture where ethnic ties are salient needs to be emphasized. As Sanjib Baruah (Baruah, 2004: 1- 13) puts it, Northeast India's inter-ethnic conflict and ethnic crisis can be understood in terms of a mutual symbiosis of state and society and not merely as a development independent of state policies. To a significant extent ethnic mobilisation in Northeast India are responses to and artifacts of official policy.

The ethnic political mobilization needs ethnic entrepreneurs- political and cultural activists. "The saliency of ethnicity in the politics of Northeast India- ethnic agendas, ethnic militias and ethnic violence- is not simply the result of the condition of ethnic diversity and the fluidity of ethnic categories; it can be understood only in terms of a symbiotic relationship between state and society" (ibid:6).

In this sense understanding of the state corresponds to that of Evans (Evans, 1979: 5-16) who envisions the state as an actor that functions as a "diverse collection of organizations and individuals which may possess a high degree of autonomy, but which is interconnected by legal obligations and bureaucratic ties. As a measure actor in social processes the state is in a position to define the terms and content of interaction within ethnic groups, between ethnic groups and between an ethnic group and the state (Enloe, 1980; Young, 1976) The state's influence can be described as one of 'a transcendent despotism over reality' that can exercise its domination through the 'fixation of boundaries, orientation of the community system, patterning of economic activity, containment of population movement and parameter setting for political conflict' (Young, 1976, pp 66-67).

The state, however, is more than a force influencing the social processes that encompasses different groups. It is also resource for which ethnic groups compete (Brass, 1985; Skinner, 1975).

It can hold the key to the wide range of economic and political benefits that it distributes by some internally determined processes. For example, the central government in India has introduced and regulates a wide range of preferential policies aimed at assisting the socio-economic development of India's various ethnic groups, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Whoever controls the specific state apparatus responsible for disbursement of the benefits is in a powerful position to affect the livelihood of a large number of groups and communities.

The state is neither necessarily a neutral nor a passive actor in these encounters. It is an autonomous body that possesses its own interest and objectives independent of the rest of the populations. It can be a potentially disinterested party that engages in mediation and crisis management or it can negotiate to achieve goals based on narrower interests. On first glance the Indian central government's continual dialogue and negotiation with protesting Assamese groups between 1971 and 1983 would appear to place it in the role of mediator and manager. However, the ulterior motives that were served by their actions after 1979 suggest that the state was concerned primarily with reestablishing the domination over Assam. Thus, the state can use its influence to establish, entrench or even expand its power (Enloe, 1980) In the case of Assam we can hypothesize that the central government was more concerned with its power base in the post 1979 period than in alleviating the ethnic tensions and conflicts of the area. The central government's practices during this period are more in keeping with the assessment that state actions 'take firms that attempt to reinforce the authority, political longevity, and social control of the state organizations while incumbents generate relevant policies or policy ideas.' (Skocpol, 1984: 26).

Ethnicity, Primordial or Instrumental?

One observes that in combination with political and economic forces, culture and religion provided the basis for the creation and maintenance of an intense ethnic conflict which have continued over the years in Assam. But while the conflict was always ethnic in character, the roles of culture and religion were not the same at all times. Fears of cultural assimilation were critical in facilitating the powerful Assam agitation, which

would seem to support the primordial argument that ethnicity is ever present across time and space and events. But the process of government-agitator negotiations reduce the cultural component to one of a number of bargaining points, which would seem to follow the 'instrumentalist' view that ethnicity is manipulated for political and economic gains (Darnil and Prikh, 1988: 278).

One can argue that both the positions are correct in parts. Though concerns such as cultural integrity and religious freedom can play major parts in facilitating ethnic conflict in itself, at the same time however, they can often be co-opted to serve other interests concerned. Thus, ethnicity with its ability to shift emphasis between political, economic, and the cultural factors, is a more illuminating framework for understanding conflict. Also as we discuss the Assam movement in the following sections it will be clearly demonstrates how uni-dimensional explanations of ethnic conflicts can obscure both real causes and genuine solutions.

In this sense also it needs to be considered if ethnicity can be understood as an ideology with its roots in the structural arrangements of the society and with its obvious, inherent covert or overt class basis and biases. Simply put, ideology represents sectional interests and its resultant limitations in the form of prejudices and biases. This historical tendency can be observed in the case of Assam movement. In this case too, ideology has played an important role in the emergence of the movement, its growth, establishment of well defined support base and continuity. The ideology of the Assam movement propelled a counter-movement as it obviously had its opponents both within and without.

C. Understanding Issues of identity:

The concept:

The concept of identity is layered and fluid nature. A focus on the process of social construction of identities means recognising that identities are not fixed, but are constantly being defined and redefined through interactions at all levels of states and societies. (Young 1993 ; Tilley 1997, Green, 2002) The scholars under the constructivist banner emphasize the multilayered and inter-subjective nature of group identities and

criticize the notion that such social dichotomies and categories are natural, essential, or fixed.

However the central premise of social construction- that people interactively create meanings which then shape their lives- has long been recognised in social theories. As Clifford Geertz drawing on Max Weber wrote, “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.” (Geertz, 1973:5).

However, while there at present a fairly wide agreement regarding the fact that identities are ‘spun’ and not natural social divisions, scholars differ in their analyses of these constructions. Some, focused on the multiplicity of identity, reject such oversimplified categories as inherently disempowering. Others retort that dismissing these categories may disable potentially empowering identity-based politics.

The former school of thought, emphasizing the danger of categories, can appeal to those who want to reject categories entirely, break down the “words that build walls by labeling race and ethnicity” and allow people “to stand aside, narrate, and debate the terms that others assign them” (Heath, 1995: 45). According to this approach, the historically oppressive dichotomies like upper caste/ lower caste, white/ coloured and so on, must be rejected in favour of an emphasis on multiple and overlapping identities: each individual’s identity is an amalgam including gender, age, class, caste, race, nation, region, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and countless other facets that cannot be slotted into a particular category. Literatures grounded on this are ample across disciplines. A significant section of anthropologists and historian’s research underscores the fluidity and complexity of social identity and problems of imposed categories (Daniel, 1984; Metcalf, 1995). In the field of Feminism and Post-modern theories focus is made on ‘hybridity’ and the impossibility of unitary categories, (Freidman 1995; Bhaba 1994; Essed, 2001) and literary figures whose personal experiences and writings attest to the dangers of classification (Fanon 1967; Rushdie 1995). Whereas, some scholars are critical of the ‘officially enforced labeling activities’, associated with the colonial and post-colonial state policies. Eschewing the classification and counting of peoples, Appadurai argues that “Statistics are to bodies and social types what maps are to territories: they flatten and enclose” (Appadurai, 1993: 326).

A second and equally diverse group of scholars focuses on the instrumental constructions of identities, illuminating how classifications not only can be a tool of violence or oppression but also can be turned to the advantage of oppressed groups. Since a focus on the multiplicity of identities fragments any given social group, students of social movements have captured theoretical understanding for disabling transformative politics (Handler, 1992). Anthropologist Dorrin Kondo explains this seeming paradox that people may “simultaneously resist and reproduce, challenging and reappropriating meanings as they also undermine those challenges” (Kondo, 1990: 221).

Scholars like Michael Walzer bring in another perspective to the debate on the state policy on identity with his work on ‘toleration’ and possible models of government for multi-cultural societies. He describes a “post-modern project” in which people “have begun to experience...a life without clear boundaries and without secure or singular identities” and respond “with resignation, indifference, stoicism, curiosity, and enthusiasm to the tics and foibles of their “post-modern fellows” (Walzer, 1997: 87). Likewise, Philomena Essed proposes moving “toward multiple, nonessentialist politics of identity” (Essed 2001: 498).

When a government identifies certain groups of citizens as the targets of a policy, state identification and social identity become intertwined. Charles Taylor recognizes this ‘dialogical’ nature of identity construction: “[o]ur is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others”. He argues that “the supposedly fair and difference-blind society is not only inhuman (because suppressing identities) but also, in a subtle and unconscious way, itself highly discriminatory” (Taylor, 1994: 34).

Identity and Hegemony of the Big Nation:

The Indian state ‘with a predominantly colonial desire to characterize, control and define the cultural spaces of ‘Indianness’ finds expression in multiple forms.’ (Srivastava Mukesh, 1992: 48.) This desire correspondingly ‘preempts’ what Gyanendra Pandey as also Partha Chatterjee in his ‘Nation and its fragments’ calls, ‘the fragments’- the smaller communities of various shades- all of whom attempt to represent the minority cultures and practices which have been expected to fall in line with the ‘mainstream’, i.e.

the 'Brahminical, Hindu, Consumerist, nation culture'.(Pandey, 1991:559; Chatterjee, 1993).

Samir Kumar Das points out the 'inappropriateness' of this 'seamless and totalising' nationalism on two grounds. On the one hand this had helped 'the emergence of the nation-state as the hegemonic actor in the public realm.' However, on the other hand, this hegemonic agenda in the name of advancing universality and rationality, goes towards 'disorienting' the smaller cultural-identity groups and ethnic minorities. 'Never before in Indian history has the state been the vanguard of such a messianic nationalism', he writes (Das, 1994: 7)

However, the issue of the centrality of the state in the building the nation and it's dealing with the 'fragments', have to be kept in focus. Ethnic problems have to be viewed not only as a consequence of the state's project of nation-building but also a response to the states abdication of the very project.

Colonial Legacies Shaping Contemporary Identity Politics:

The literature on colonial states' involvement in identity politics documents how colonial recruitment, education, missionary work, cartography, legal codification, and ethnographic classification contributed to the hardening of ethnic, caste or racial fault lines (Horowitz, 1985: 149-66; Young, 1994: 228-36; Brass, 1985; Fredrickson, 1981; Marx 1998). These processes recorded identities and also reinforced them by changing the stakes associated with certain identities. For example, in colonial India, the recording of castes in the census contributed to the formation of interests groups that lobbied census commissioners to try to improve their official caste rankings(Rudolph and Rudolph, 1967).

Contemporary states continue to shape social identities. Sociologist Ali Rattansi describes the social construction of identities as a three-pronged process, "involving processes of 'self-identification' as well as formation by disciplinary agencies such as the state, and including the involvement of the social sciences, given their incorporation in the categorization and distributive activities of the state" (Rattansi 1995: 257).

Colonial anthropologists and census takers were not the last data collectors to spark political responses. Michael White and Sharon Sassler, in the field of population studies draw attention to how “issues of ethnic identification and assimilation are intertwined with the data collection mechanisms used by official agencies (White and Sassler 1995: 470). These contemporary analyses suggest that state identifications, whether legal, administrative or scientific continue to interact with and influence identity claims.

Colonial classifications as such have been characterized as “efforts to render fluid and confusing social and political relationships into categories sufficiently static and reified and thereby useful to colonial understanding and control” (Stoler and Cooper 1996: 11).

Indian state’s colonial and contemporary impulses to categorize and record identities have been remarkably resilient. Crispin Bates, writing on racial theory in India, notes that “its applications were not uniquely imperial but characteristic, much more generally, of the modus operandi of the modern, centralized, bureaucratic state” (Bates 1995: 222). Even in colonial states, “the novel communal partitioning of society was not simply implanted from above and beyond. An intricate dialectic unfolded” (Young 1994: 234).

In addition to the importance of recognizing elite members of colonial and post-colonial societies and their contributions to the notions of identity, these studies have drawn attention to the contributions of social movements and political activists to a politics of identity.

New attention on the influence or “agency” of disadvantaged groups in society is a notable contribution of the “subaltern school,” which recognizes the importance of including in historical accounts the “small voices which are drowned in the noise of statist commands”. For they have many stories to tell, stories which for their complexity are unequalled by statist discourse and indeed opposed to its abstract and oversimplifying modes (Guha 1996: 3).

Therefore, one needs to take a critical perception on studying the “meeting point of the state and the society” while dealing with situation like Assam, where simplified state identifications and complex social identities rarely coincide and often clash. (Skoepol 1985: 27).

D. Ethnicity and Identity:

It is interesting to observe the historical backdrop of the Black Revolution of the 1960s for the emergence of direct and dialectical ties between concepts of ethnicity and identity. The emergence of issues like 'new ethnicity' affirmed the durability of the ethnic consciousness, gave it legitimacy and dignity, and forged an intimate bond between the concepts of ethnicity and identity (Gleason, 1995: 195.) And these developments not only took place against the background of the national identity crisis, they were also dialectically related to it- that is , ethnic or minority identities became more appealing options because of the discrediting of traditional Americanism or the national American culture because of a host of internal and external contradictions, like war and racial crisis. As Nathan Glazer pointed out in 1975, a situation had by then developed in 'the ecology of identities' in which, for the first time in American history, it seemed more attractive to many individuals to affirm an ethnic identity than to affirm that one was simply an American.' (Glazer, 1975:177-8).

We observe that the example of the ethnic revival movement of the American blacks have influenced the struggling ethnic groups of Assam significantly. For example, one finds repeated mention of the need to stage an aesthetic rebel against cultural subordination in the inaugural speech delivered on the occasion of All Mishing Student's Union (TMPK)'s annual session at Sadia, on 2006. Drawing reference to the Black movement the speaker said, "against the 'white aesthetics' the 'Blacks movement' came out with 'black aesthetics', with the central motto black is". This issue of the 'Blacks' movement have taught us that any movement aimed at any nationalities rights and liberation should have the capacity to assume the form of a cultural movement....in our context we need to seriously speculate whether as a solid principal we can adopt the position of " Mongoloid aesthetics as against Aryan Aesthetics" (Pegu, 2006: 99).

This refers to an understanding of the term ethnicity that acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes

which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time. (Hall, 1995: 199-203).

The new politics of representation therefore also sets in motion an ideological contestation around the term 'ethnicity' based on a retheorisation of the concept of difference. It heralds a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses the difference and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities. Difference is an essentially contested site. There is difference which makes a radical and unbridgeable separation and there is 'difference' which is positional, conditional and conjunctural, closer to Derrida's notion of 'difference' (Ashcraft and Griffiths, 1995: 161).

Stuart Hall calls it 'the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity' (Hall, 1995: 202). He writes, "This marks a real shift in the point of contestation, since it is no longer only between antiracism and multiculturalism but inside the notion of ethnicity itself. What is involved is the splitting of the notion between, on the one hand the dominant notion which connects it to nation and 'race' and on the other hand what I think is the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery. That is to say, a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture. We are all in that sense, ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But this is also recognition that this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive only by marginalising, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity." (Ibid: 203).

In a Marxist framework however ethnicity is viewed within an evolutionary framework with the assumption that all the world's ethnic groups will eventually merge into a 'common group', in a classless society in a distant future. However as B.K.Roy Burman (Roy Burman, 1990: 137) notes, this evolutionary dimension seem to be envisaged quite frequently in oversimplified forms, even by non-Marxist scholars.

Spread of modern education, industrialization, and economic demands and mass struggles were expected to erode ethnic consciousness over a period of time, at least in

Western democratic societies. However the experiences of the post world war realities have shown it otherwise.

However though in the contemporary world, ethnic consciousness is to be considered as a dimension of interaction between society and state as well as of social organisation of production and culturally determined pattern of consumption, it is also related to men's quest for belonging. Charles Taylor argues that the modern identity is characterized by an emphasis on its inner voice and capacity for authenticity - that is, the ability to find a way of being that is somehow true to oneself (Taylor, 1994).

Roy Burman puts it thus:

“Ethnicity in today's world is thus one form of assertion against the defacement of humanity. It is not necessarily against civilisation or against wider social formations, frequently it is a protest against the perversion of civilisation and a reinforcement of wider social formations, insofar as these social formations are compatible with the humanist axiological imperatives of the historical situation. In this perspective, ethnic consciousness need not always be considered as constituting closed circuit. It may also be a constituent element of social entities with wider and wider orbits, and continuously deepening human meaning” (Roy Burman, 1990: 139).

E. Process of Expansion of Ethnic Identities:

It is worth noting that comparatively isolated tribal communities adopt a viability strategy almost as reflex action when they are closely articulating with state structures. This might take two forms, infra nationalism and proto-nationalism. In the latter, the local elite, with or without the support of traditional elite goes for collaboration of traditional symbols, not only for protecting traditional rights, but also for extending access to new resources and new opportunities. Proto-nationalism can serve as the nucleus of diverse types of socio-culture and socio-political movements depending on internal structural differentiations among the concerned communities as well as on (a) harmonic orientations of state apparatus and state process and (b) disharmonic orientations of state apparatus and state-process. As Bunton (Bunton, 1988: 25) points

out, it is not helpful to concentrate upon the character of community's institutions at the cost of structure of relations in which various communities are involved, for it is this structure that brings them into particular forms of conflict and co-operation. Here one can also refer to Poulantzas, who points out that a social class or fraction or stratum of a class may take up a class position that does not correspond to its class interest (Poulantzas, 1975:15). This line of understanding can be used to explain the support of the Assamese peasants to the middle-class controlled student movements as well as the inability of the middle-class itself to totally sidestep the interests of the peasant class.

Both proto-nationalism and infra-nationalism are to be distinguished from sub-nationalism. The first two are phases of identity expansion of ethnic groups which remained isolated from the dominant political process of the state or of the political mobilisation leading to state formation. Sub-nationalism is a phase of contradiction of ethnic entities which got closely involved in the dominant political process of the state, but among which parochial loyalties are coming to the surface as an outcome of the iniquitous functioning of the state apparatus (Baruah, 1999: 5).

With this framework, Roy Burman points out two major constraints in the process of development of state oriented proto-tribal entities in the Assamese context. First, is the historical memory of the tribes and the hiatus in perception of the meaning of historical events among the tribals and non-tribals. Second is the affective-cognitive difference about the cultural rights and about the structures and strategies of resource mobilisation (Roy Burman, 1990: 141-142).

Without going into the question as to whether the elites of proto-nationalism constitute one-class or not, none can perceive that much depends in the racial memory of the ethnic group about the pattern of relationship with dominant ethos or centre of political power before internal ranking or stratification of class formation was crystallized, and also on the man resource ratio, and culturally prescribed norms of sharing of social goods.

F. Ethnicity and Issues of Assamese Identity:

As we have discussed in the normative sense, ethnicity is defined with reference to what the members of the community imagine to be their icons and images, signs and symbols or codes of social communication that should characterize them in contradiction with the others. While in the ordinary sense an ethnic identity is ordained and given, in the normative sense it is imaginatively constructed or to use a currently fashionable term, 'invented'.

Construction is a political process whereby an ethnic community endeavors to be what it imagines itself to be its ideal collective self and much of these endeavors is geared to the objective of bridging up the distance between what it is according to itself and what it imagines itself to be. Political intervention as Ernesto Laclau tells us, presupposes 'the assertion of a lack' (Laclau, 1994: 3).

The key term for understanding this process of construction is the psychoanalytic category of identification, with its explicit assertion of a lack at the root of any identity. One needs to identify with something because there is an originary and insurmountable lack of identity. The distinction between ordinary and normative definitions of ethnicity is crucial to any appraisal of ethnic politics in Assam. We may refer to the Assam movement in order to illustrate how the 'assertion of a lack' is implicit in any protest of construction. This is nowhere more vividly illustrated than in the following appeal of Asom Sahitya Sabha:

"The Assamese people are going to lose their linguistic-demographic majority status, their cultural identity, their economic interests and political rights in their own home state. If these genuine causes behind the movement are neither understood nor taken into consideration, we are afraid; the Government would not be able to find out a solution to the Assamese problem" (Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1980).

Ethnicity defined normatively as construction bears out two major implications for us: First, the process of construction has no visible end in the sight and is unlikely to come to a grinding halt not only because there is 'an insurmountable gap between what a community attempts to achieve and its ability to succeed in such attempts' but also

because communities by virtue of their being imagining subjects are never tired of reconstructing what they wish to become, of erasing and replacing them with never ones. As we will note in the next chapter, it is interesting that the notion of collective identity crystallized during the Assam movement of 1979-85 was markedly at variance with the one articulated by ULFA.

Secondly, as we use the concept of identity in the normative sense of 'depicting the ways in which we locate ourselves in relation to others-a process by which we place ourselves in the network of social relationships', (Tallman, 1976: 89). It is obvious that we have also to re-'locate' and re-'place' ourselves in keeping with the changes undergone by others and wrought in the network of social relationships. This is based on the assumption is that the others and the network are likely to be factors beyond the exclusive control of the concerned community.

Identity crisis may not necessarily be an 'aggravated' one as the changes in 'others' and in the 'social network' may not be either rapid or radical to precipitate such protests that are unlikely to be contained and absorbed by established social and political institutions. This in other words, sparks off non-insurgent forms of protests normally culminating in mutually acceptable Memoranda and Accords. Thus, to cite an instance, the Assam movement of 1979-85 was principally a non-insurgent form of protest. Even the decision of boycotting the elections of 1983 was not taken because the leading organisations like, All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All-Assam Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) had no faith in the democratic set-up of the country but because the decision of holding elections was itself deemed violative of the principles of democratic set-up as laid down in the law of the land-as the electoral roles on the basis of which elections were to be held, contained the names of the foreigners who are not legally entitled to cast their votes. S.K.Das has rightly pointed out that this decision was in fact informed by a rarely found urge to put the government back into the legal and constitutional track (Das, 1995: 56).

G. Conceptualizing the Community as the Site for Identity:

A community can be defined in two distinguishable ways.

In the inclusive sense, it can be defined as a body of socially mobilized people under a movement. The body thus mobilized, represents a certain suppression of the differentiation along the ethnic, caste, religious or even class lines, internal to itself. Hence the community serves as the lowest common denominator that seems to cut across the differentiations.

In a situation like Assam, this offers two possibilities.

For one, the perceptions of the community can be those that of a yet indeterminate middle-class serving its interests, but they are still the perceptions of the community at large in the sense that the entire community irrespective of the class differentiation comes to share them at that particular period of time.

For another, the middle-class may either voluntarily subscribe to the perceptions of the general masses or people, lower down and ultimately turn out to be their spokesman or even submit to their will.

In the exclusive sense, a community is a socially mobilized body relatively autonomous from the hegemonic influences of a middle-class. A community thus possesses two prominent characteristics; first, it has to be distinguished from a nationality. While community as a mobilized body can retain an amount of autonomy from the hegemonic influences of the middle class, the nationality not only cannot retain it but is precisely forged at their instance.

Secondly, since the community is a socially mobilized body involved in politics, it has to define and redefine the boundaries continuously depending on the exigencies of the political situation. As Brass argues, 'to define community as essentially a linguistic tie or for the matter any primordial tie is to fall into the empiricist trap' (Brass, 1991: 37).

The spread of Assamese Nationalism at the behest of the Caste-Hindu Assamese middle-class, can be compared to the propagation of the nationalist discourse as articulated by the English- educated middle-class towards the close of the last century in Bengal, involving a process of ruthless violence that operated through 'reduction,

persuasion and flattery' rather than 'brute, mute exercise of force', 'violence of a sophist rather than that of an executioner', a warfare carried through some other means (Chatterjee,1993: 14).

Das argues that 'the political assertion of the community in modern times depends critically upon its ability to act independently of the supremacy of the middle-class', and community at times acts as a counter-weight to the middle-class supremacy (Das, 1995: 108).

Section two

Understanding Assamese Nationalism and the Process of Nationality Building in Assam

It is interesting to note that though the territory that came to be known as Assam in Post-colonial times was a creation under colonialism, one finds various writings on Assam by cultural historians emphasizing the 'Composite character of her culture' (Choudhury, 1959: 333) By this primarily they meant that the foundations of the Assamese culture being 'primarily Vedic' (Barua, 1965: 11), has successfully 'absorbed' various tribal (Kirata) elements both of the hills and the plains. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee calls it 'Assam's great contribution to the synthesis of cultures and fusion of races'(Chatterjee, 1956: 11). Also it looks at Assam as the 'frontier outpost' (Barua B.K., 1951, p.200) of the Indian civilization. To sum up, Assamese culture is viewed to be 'composite' both from within as well as without. However, one cannot miss the point that all these writings that helped shape up the dominant view of the 'composite' and 'inclusive' Assamese culture, belongs to a period of lesser contestation, espousing a 'theoretical innocence,' which was later strongly contested by resisting narratives from below.

However, if modern nationalisms are acts of imagining, based on the diffusion of the idea of a nation-ness, (Anderson, 1983:123).one has to contend that the Assamese nation has been 'insufficiently imagined' (Rushdie, 1997: 86). As we will see that the narratives that were used to define the Assamese nation inclusively by incorporating symbolic

settlements between different communities at one historical moment have been later contested. From the research perspective of this study what needs to be looked into are the processes and agents that organise the production of memory –history in Assam to constitute both a community and a platform for making claims about identity, because it is a complex interaction between memory and power, exposing the weak points of Assam’s composite culture and ideologies of Assamese nationalism.

A nation needs a history, as without history there are no people. However, one observes that in multi-ethnic societies like Assam production of history has been essentially a site of hegemony for the dominant nationalism. As different ethnic groups contest the dominating truth of the ‘national history’, one observes the politicized and tensed relationship between history and memory. At the core of the debate is the assumption that history has a claim to truth that memory does not. What is surprising is the reluctance of scholars to acknowledge that both memory and history are processes of creation: history, like memory, creates its subject –it does not simply recover it. It is worrisome that the debate hides the issue: Whose memory? Whose history is considered as a form of language, and what gets disqualified as inadequate and hence, not history? It is necessary to remember that memory, like history, is the site of the triumphant; the winner gets the memory as well as the history (Zertel 2000).

Undoubtedly, power is the problematic that needs emphasis, rather than the question of whether history and memory are complimentary or opposing constructions.

A. The Trends of Assamese Nationalisms:

“Nationalism”, says Paul Brass “is a political movement by definition. It requires political organization, skilled political leadership, and resources to gain support to make successful demands in the political system. Moreover, the movement must be able to compete effectively against alternate political groups and must be effective enough to withstand governments to subdue it or to undercut its political support. Effective political organisation and political leadership and the resource to maintain them are independent variables that profoundly influence the outcome” (Brass, 1991: 48).

Expressions of nationalism varies with situation and context , however, despite the structural divisions between categories like Nation, nationality and ethnic groups, in terms national consciousness, aspirations and visions this dividing line becomes too narrow at times. Even a small ethnic group's articulation of its own ethnic-national consciousness is not very different from the trends of the dominant nationalist discourse. Thus some scholars argues that one has to accept ethnic nationalism as a real issue, and thus coming out of the confines of the classical-European understanding of issues of nationalism, of which arguably Marxism also bears the legacy to some extent. (Bora, 2008: 45).

The European vision of nationalism has at its heart the concept of territorial nation state. Territory becomes symbol of individual and collective identities.

Nationalist projects are based on the ground realities of the situation and anchored around some basis. The objective bases are: territoriality, common language, culture, tradition, legacy and a common historical experience and the subjective basis are the feeling of nationalism between the component groups or people within a nation.

Though in the post-colonial realities, nationalisms of different degrees might settle for autonomy within a multi-national state structure, the fact remains that ethos of nationalism is moved by a search for a closed territorial boundary and exclusive control over it.

Interestingly, one observes that these goals may lie dormant in the initial phases of nationalistic agitation where issues of cultural, linguistic or legal prominence (as with the demand for scheduled tribe's status) takes the centre stage, but as the agitation intensifies the political and territorial issues comes to the fore. It is this web of political issues that holds the historic relevance of nationalism. It's seen that the territorial designs of nationalism have historically taken three primary forms: Secession, autonomy and irredentism. All these three are present in varying degrees in the history of ethno-nationalistic agitation in Assam.

Central to the understanding of the formation of the modern Assamese identity is the account of the formation and development of what social scientist like A.K. Baruah and Manorama Sharma call the 'dominant Assamese nationalism'. They write,

“The nationalism which developed in Assam grew under the leadership of this middle-class and the Assamese, came to play the role of a dominant nationality in this region...the insensitivity of the Assamese middle-class, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and towards the ethnic minorities had generated some resentment” (Barua. and M Sharma, 1991:20).

The ‘dominant Assamese nationalism’ is all-pervasive and is reflected in ‘history, art, literature, philosophy and religion’ of Assam.(ibid.).More significantly, this has enormous political significance widening the hiatus between the tribals and non-tribals in the state. It has been argued that, “The tribals have never been taken into confidence by the caste-Hindu Assamese elite. Nor has the elite ever thought of sharing power with them” (Datta P.S, 1990: 17).

We argue that the character of the dominant Assamese nationalism has been civic nationalism and its central subject matter for a long time has been the Assamese language. This nationalism’s doors are open to any religious and ethnic group adopting Assamese language. This explains its attempt to engulf the immigrant Muslim population of the state. In the same way it has with some success brought within its fold different tribal and ethnic groups. Although in the recent years there has been a rise in the ethnic-nationalist tendencies within various smaller ethnic groups in Assam, these forces have more often assumed a posture of co-existence than confrontation to Assamese nationalism (Bora, 2008: 54). In fact this explains the absence of any vocal and powerful opposition of Assamese nationalist forces towards the rise and aspirations of smaller ethnic nationalisms, most solidly in the form of administrative control over a desired territory. Though an orthodox section of Assamese nationalists are not supportive of this kinds of understanding, their being silent in public, has helped avoiding any confrontation.

This can be viewed as a gradual loss of the hegemonic group rather than perceiving it as weakness of the Assamese nationalist project. It should be understood as a historic feature of the Brahmaputra Valley. The valleys have been the common living space to various diverse historically evolved ethnic groups of people and as such spirits of mutual accommodation of various nationalist forces are a reality.

Nationalism in essence is a political project. Modern national being is a semi-artificial construct based on an ideology that too is constructed. The aspects of culture form an integral part of any successful project of nationalism. Being a politico-cultural project it has an agenda- a manifest programme and scheme, that directs and accelerates that nationalism. It cannot be based on spontaneity. It's an act of labourious scheming. Because Assamese nationalist project lacked any scheme and programme of the kind, despite electoral power capturing a number of times it fails to leave any durable impact at the societal level. Rather, one observes that its programme being appropriated, 'hijacked' by the oppositional forces.

Assamese nationality is composed of people from various religions. With this acceptance, the healthy and progressive section of Assamese nationalist force is conscious on keeping Assamese nationalism secular, and not to let the religious question become a dividing point within the national identity.

Hence, it is not surprising that the dominant vision of a civic and hence a majoritarian Assamese nationalism finds not only acceptable but a functional necessity the instances of hegemony and dominance of the majority ethnic Assamese groups over the minority tribal- non-Assamese speaking groups

Here it will be useful to note what Sudipta Kaviraj has contended in the context of the Indian state that the constitutional form of nationalism which was civic based on a secular, republican citizenship; provided at the same time with characteristic prudence; an expression of ethnic identities. This allowance not only made ethnicity vulnerable to its instrumentalisation by elites but also provided the fulcrum to these various marginal identities to redefine their sense of the self in changed socio-political situations. Specificity of cultural differences began to be rearticulated and this rearticulation of cultural differentiation led to the growth of oppositional mobilisations against the homogenizing dominant hegemonic centre (Kaviraj ,1994: 22-25).

It gives rise to the problematic of ethnic-Nationalism, which has become an undeniable reality of the post-colonial world and which can be emblemized as a form of identity-assertion.

Thus we see that it is the civic nationalism with the core of a modernist, liberal ontology practiced by dominant student groups like AASU in the aftermath of the Assam movement, that have further ethnised the smaller student groups practicing oppositional politics of ethnic-group rights.

It is interesting that these new styles of ethnic-nationalism by the smaller ethnic groups in Assam, have been reflective of their strategy to (dis)locate themselves from the colonized site of power (Smith, 1998:175.)

However it cannot be seen merely as a division between the student groups of the majority and minority nationalities. Because ‘solidarity’ being a new axis in this politics of identity, we find sharing of normative space (at least compared to their relation with AASU, a passive one if not a confrontational one) between these organisations with ethnic Assamese backed student groups like the AJYCP, which is deemed more sensitive to the agendas of ethnic nationalism as it espouses a charter which is more ethnic-nationalistic than civic-constitutional.

What accounts for this assertive tendency of the Assamese middle-class? Is it some logic internal to the dynamics of community formation in Assam or is it a reaction of a formative Assamese nationality towards some hostile external realities?

For a clearer understanding of this phenomenon of a rising and hegemonising middle-class in Assam, one has to opt for an analysis of the nationality formation process in the region.

B. The Growth of the Assamese Nationality: the Contradictions and Contestations:

The Backdrop: Advent of Colonialism and the Colonial Capital:

It has to be noted that the territory that came to be known as Assam in Post-colonial times was a creation of colonialism. Before it, the advent of the Ahoms from upper Burma in the thirteenth century brought about significant changes in the socio-political scenario of the region and consolidated for the first time the very idea of ‘Asom’ or

Assam. The small tribal kingdoms like the Koch, Matak, Jayantia and so on were annexed, many a times on the basis of tribal solidarity, and it got further solidified in the form of a unified resistance against the Mughal invasion (Borpujari, 1987).

Through the treaty at Yandaboo in 1826 Assam was transferred under British colonial rule. In 1874 Assam was made a separate province which until then was as an administrative part of Bengal division. Now the territorial boundary of Assam got extended through colonial decrees, by inclusion of hill areas and the districts of Sylhet and Goalpara to Assam. Thus the British Assam no longer remained the exclusive homeland of the Assamese. The political boundary of colonial Assam was thus extended at the cost of her relative homogeneity in the composition of population.

The colonial reality also opened up Assam to the decrees of colonial capitalism. Assam was made into a classic case of colonial hinterland economy, a strong intrusion of 'merchant capital', in the form of nascent Indian bourgeoisie penetrated Assam following the needs of colonial administration and market. At the a large inflow of poor peasants and migrating labourers from areas like Chotnagpur, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Nepal, Maimansing was engineered in the the interest of the colonial economy. This migration had far-reaching implication in four areas where it in intensified the competition for resources among the different ethnic groups:

- A. Tribal migration in tea plantation
- B. Bengali Muslim migration in agriculture.
- C. Bengali Hindu migration in the service sector.
- D. Marwari migration in trade, business and industry

Thus we see that the annexation of semi-tribal and semi-feudal society in Assam by the colonial rulers into British India in 1826 paved the way for a different historical transformation which had broken Assam's prolonged relative isolation from the economy and polity of the Indian subcontinent of the pre-colonial period. The traditional social structure changed. The aristocracy, particularly the ruling clan non-caste Ahoms weakened due to the hostility and mistrust of the colonial administration. However, a small fraction of upper-caste groups managed to escape the onslaught on the pre-colonial

aristocracy propelled by the mechanics of the colonial system. They produced the first group of Western educated Asamiya middle-class by the end of the 19th century. The success of the upper caste and the failure of the non-caste groups like the Ahoms rested on the question of acquisition of land. Those who could produce some surplus from their land retention (the priestly class and not the pre-colonial aristocracy) could afford liberal Western education and thus imbibing incipient middle-class values (Gohain 2001; Datta, 1990).

Many people in order to avoid dual oppression of colonialism and feudalism migrated to Assam where feudal oppression was far below the level of East Bengal due to abundance of land and thin population. The colonial situation in Assam opened the floodgates of migration and the process, changed the social composition of Assam's population. Following divide and rule policy the colonial state provoked and patronized the Asamiya and non-Asamiya conflict in colonial Assam, while paradoxically creating conditions of massive migration to Assam. Besides, it led to a distorted growth of Assamese nationality fraught with problems of assimilation.

The Issues Affecting the Consolidation of the Assamese Nationality:

1. Religion, Forming Normative Consensus or Consensual Dominance?

As one sociologist argues, religion has been pervasive in the social systems of Assam both as idiom and discourse (Bhattacharjya, 2000: 134). This has to be seen in the light where apart from the particular feature of the Indian society of a caste-tribe or tribe-caste continuum, Assamese society is characterized by a tribal base or bottom which is peculiar to it. . . This bottom is held together by traditional institutes like 'Khel', 'Mel', 'Raij' and the multidimensional role of the 'Namghar'. The administrative unit of the Ahom system, the 'Khel' got dissolved over the time into the organisation of the neo-Vaishnavite 'Namghar'. Influence of the 'Khel' system has minimised the caste-gaps in Assam, and the higher value occupied by the concept of 'Raij'- the people, in the society have led to a society based on wide-spread cordiality. Sociologists argue that this significant fermenting of social fraternity and co-operation outside the caste system have not been the case for other Indian societies (Guha 1991; Bhattacharjya, 2000).

It is argued that the great effect of neo-Vaishnavism (a contemporary of the pan-Indian Bhakti-movement, with strong blending of the religious and the social under a reformist programme, heralded in Assam by 'Saint' Sankaradev in the sixteenth century in the process of nation building and the emergence of the Assamese identity were that "this new faith spread rapidly, involving in due course a majority of the Assamese people" (Guha, 1991: 100). Its role also has to be read in the context of Hinduisation of the Ahom and tribal populations of the Brahmaputra valley with a subsequent shift of a tribal pattern of economy to a peasant economy and the rise of the peasant class. In this sense one can see neo-Vaishnavism essentially acting as a feudal ideology that was helping to detribalize a society in transition, like the developing feudalism, the neo-Vaishnavite ideology too had a detribalizing role (Misra, 2001: 8; Datta, 1993:2).

Hiren Gohain refers to the success of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism in attracting the non-caste communities in Assam to a broader and more tolerant culture, and through which he argues that "the foundation of the modern Assamese nationality was laid" (Gohain 1987:11).

Scholars treat Sankardeva is seen as the "father of the nation" (jatir janak) and his Vaishnava movement is considered as the cementing force of the Assamese nationality (Barman, 1986: 114) it was therefore natural that the very concept of the Assamese identity would become inextricably linked with the philosophy, symbols and cultural practices of the *Mahapurusiya* faith (Misra, 2001: 8).

However, in the later development of this faith it is significant to observe the gradual erosion of the liberal values like inclusiveness, democratic set-up and surfacing of the essential limits of this faith in terms of an inability to counter the casteist division of the Assamese society.

The growth of casteism within the Vaishnavite institutions, which significantly alienated the tribal communities from it, has been observed as a classical example of ideology being subverted by practice (Bhattacharjya, 2000: 135).

Bhattacharjya argues that the conceptual tool of a 'dominant caste' as developed by M.N. Srinivasan (Srinivasan, 1966) to analyse the Indian society and polity, may not be directly applicable to Assam. The numerically stronger classes have not been dominant

at the same time in Assam due to age-old caste-mobility and influence of Vaishnavite ideology. Moreover untouchability could never become a primary feature of the caste system in Assam. because of the influence of a continuing structural principle of the Assamese society (with strong influence of tribal cultures), (Bhattacharjya 2000: 140).

However, in retrospect one observes discriminations and social taboos based on caste have substantially wrecked the internal cohesion of the society in Assam, along the lines of caste inspite of the relatively lesser prominence of inhuman practices like untouchability.

2. The ‘Unity in Struggle’; The Adversity of Colonialism:

Another primary factor which helped the consolidation of the Assamese community in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries was the growing peasant resistance to British rule in some of the Lower Assam districts inhabited mainly by plains tribal people, and the peasant uprisings of the closing decades of the 19th century. The traditional *Raij mels* or people’s assemblies which were revived in the course of the peasant struggles against excessive taxation gave a fillip to Assamese nationalistic feeling.

“The widespread peasant struggle, based on the unity of the entire peasantry and a section of the non-cultivating land-owners, made an impact on the contemporary Assamese society. The non-cultivating land-owners-Brahmins, Mahantas and dolois, the traditional rural elite-apparently took the initiative and played a leading role. But it was the poor peasantry and the other sections of the rural poor, including the artisans, who actually lent it a militant character (Guha,1977: 54).

Also, the peasant uprising was soon seen as the first organized popular movement against the British government and one which drew support from all sections of the society (Barpujari, 1971).

The Historical and Significant Role of the ‘Assamese’ Middle-Class:

One of the most significant social changes that Assam saw in the wake of colonization of the economy was the emergence of a middle-class and the gradual exercise of hegemony by this class over the Assamese society

One significant aspect of these struggles was the role played by the emerging Assamese middle-class which in the coming decades, would gear up the struggle for preservation of the Assamese identity. . While neither the bourgeoisie nor the big landlord class evolved during British rule, the ground however, was laid for the emergence of the Assamese middle-classes. This class was not largely alienated from land and because of this it acquired a strength and confidence quite uncharacteristic of it. Assamese society continued to nourish its strong semi-tribal and semi-feudal base although the British monetized the economy and Assam was made a part of the economic structure of British India. Unlike, in most of the parts of India, where peasant-landlord relationships have been marked by an intense degree of feudal exploitation, the Assamese peasantry, all the struggle and hardships notwithstanding, has been relatively spared from being at the mercy of big landlords. “The Assamese middle-class’s strong cultural links with the peasantry have given the peasant-middle class base of Assamese society a distinct character.”(Misra, in Abbi (ed) 1984). Initially, the tribal and the non-tribal segments within the still emerging Assamese nationality came closer on the question of putting up a common fight against the continuous occupation of cultivable land by the immigrants and this was expressed by the Indian National Congress which, by the late twenties, had replaced the Assam Association as the dominant socio-political organisation of the region.

One observes that in the peasant resistance movements of the 1880s and the 1890s both the tribal and the non-tribal sections of the Assamese population under the leadership of the rural elite had put up a common fight against the British administration (Sarkar: 1990: 53). However, the Assamese middle class emerging in the first part of the twentieth century as a product of Western education and modern entrepreneurship, (Saikia, 2000: 163) is accused of displaying a large degree of indifference towards the tribal sensibilities

One can thus observe the almost parallel development of Asom Chattra Sanmilan to that of evolution of middle-class ideas in Assam. In Assam from the end of the 19th century the power of hegemony came to be exercised by the Assamese middle-class, and thus the student articulated the values of that class almost as their own values, regardless of what class they came from. The aims, aspirations, values and interests of the dominant class became the aims, aspirations, values and interests of the students (Sarma, 2002). In essence the Asom Chattra Sanmilan was the most articulate exponent of the middle-class ideology in Assam.

A.K. Baruah explains the hegemonic rise of the middle class in Assam in the light of colonial modernization. "The dominant values of the Western world began to penetrate the Indian society, particularly the English educated middle-class. Nationalism was one of these values." (Baruah A K, 1991: 52-54). What was necessary for the fruition of economic aims developed into various types of philosophical beliefs at the level of ideas which influenced all aspects of intellectual pursuits, literary, linguistic, and cultural and so on. The development of these ideas in the West led to the development of individualism, scientifiism, secularism, concept of the dignity of man and nationalism, in short Western liberal philosophy.

With the emergence of this middle-class one sees the ideas of western liberalism taking roots in Assam and beginning to influence almost all sections of the Assamese society, as these ideas became the ideas of the hegemonic class. (Sharma M, 1990: 63-65). Thus the ideas like the dignity of men, secularism and Assamese nationalism came to permeate Assamese society. Initially these ideas were manifested in a rather non-confrontational manner as the nascent middle-class in Assam was keeping with general middle-class ideology of compromise and accommodation besides being too weak for an open anti-imperialist stand. As and when middle-class hegemony matured in Assam one saw it taking an anti-imperialist stands by the 1930s. This manifests the duality of middle-class ethos, both progressive and counter-progressive in character over a scale of time.

As we will see, the major rupture in the middle-class led project of a uni-lingual, mono-cultural and politically centralized 'Assamese nation' came from the challenges to this attempt from the hills and plains tribal group of the state.

Early Seeds of Linguistic Nationalism, Language as a Resource:

The Assamese middle-class's attempt to establish the dominance of Assamese linguistic identity became the prime issue during the first half of the twentieth century. The struggle to ensure the linguistic status of the Assamese people took precedence over all the other issues and the important question of tribal land alienation was put aside.

As we discussed the traditional Assamese elites lost out on both the economic as well as political space in the unfolding colonialism. The slowly emerging Assamese middle class, itself a product of colonial reality, was extremely sensitive about its historical incapacities in resource mobilization due to their 'non-industrial' background. Thus, for this newly emerging middle class, direct competition with the Hindu Bengalis, who already had occupied the service sector and were enjoying linguistic privilege in Assam, was a historical inevitability. In their bid to outcompete the Bengalis, the Assamese elites used the linguistic symbol as a political resource in order to mobilize the Assamese ethnic group. Thus there was a strategy to widen the ethnic boundary through linguistic expansion and assimilation of other smaller ethnic categories historically linked as well as the later migrants in plantation and agriculture in order to combat the numerical dominance of the Bengalis in colonial Assam.

Thus, elite competition in colonial Assam led to the standardization of Assamese language, construction of cultural symbols, growth of ethnic awareness and induced assimilation which had accelerated the process of internal group cohesion as well as later differentiation between the major ethnic groups in colonial Assam.

It was against such a background that the Assamese students studying in Calcutta tried to organize themselves and work for the cause of the Assamese national identity. When the Assamese Literary Society became inactive, the *Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani Samiti* (ABUSS) was formed in August 1888. Linguistic nationalism was the prime motive force behind the ABUSS which wanted to make Assamese one of the richest and most advanced languages of the world (Bezbaroa, 1970: 49).

The fear of being inundated and overtaken by “stronger” migrant nationalities as mentioned above, was attempted to be confronted by a stress on the separate identity of the Assamese people which could be ensured through economic progress and cultural achievement.

It is important to note here that henceforth the growth of Assamese national identity would become inexorably linked with the question of recognition of the Assamese language. Loyalty to the Assamese language came to be viewed as the sole criterion in establishing one’s identity as an Assamese. There seemed to have been a shift or movement from a position where the defining marks of Assamese tradition and culture made up of a mix of several ethnic streams were considered more important than the language itself, to a position where the Assamese language came to be seen as the primary and perhaps the sole cementing force of the different cultural streams which make up the Assamese community. This would eventually lead to a position where Assamese nationalists would expect all other linguistic groups of the hills and the plains of undivided Assam to accept Assamese as the sole language of the region.

Misra observes, “Could we say that the idea of the Assamese identity was gradually shifting from a position of “multilingual uniculture” to one of “unilingual multicultural?” (Misra, 2001:25). However, it is interesting to observe the subsequent developments reversing the trend.

Giving the historic backdrop to the rise and predominance of linguistic nationalism in Assam, a tribal intellectual B.K. Doley (Doley, 2006: 56-57) points out,

First, right from the nineteenth century, with the activities of the ‘Asomiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha’ (Committee for the Upliftment of the Assamese Language), a linguistic nationalism with a narrow outlook has taken deep roots in Assam.

Second, the historic clash between the Assamese and Bengali languages under the context of a hyper-nationalism led to a growth of linguistic apartheid and feeling of ‘otherness’ between the groups whose mother language is Assamese and the one’s whose are not. This developed a feeling of suspicion of the Assamese middle-class towards the development of the tribal languages.

Third, since in the time of linguistic reorganization of states, the boundary of the state was drawn around the linguistic landscape of Assamese, a nationalistic chauvinism developed to retain the absolute predominance of the Assamese language over this landscape.

Significantly, Doley writes, “The social psychology the word ‘Assamese’ denotes is not liberal enough to strengthen a diverse Assamese society made up of multilingual-multiethnic character. It is this standpoint of snobbish and one-sided hegemonic dominance that led to alienation of many ethnic linguistic groups from the Assamese society. In reality these ethnicities are “Assamese as per need”. At times, when to agitate for various demands of the state, to stand up against outsider enemies one needs mass power, ideas are propagated of these ethnicities being Assamese, but never accepted as such sincerely without trickery”(ibid) (translation mine).

As one observes the struggle for the restoration of the status of the Assamese language reflects the shift in the focus of the Assamese identity from a broad cultural rubric to a specific linguistic plane. Indeed, the reiteration of the polytechnic nature of the Assamese society on the one hand and the rather obsessive quest for a unilingual identity for Assam on the other has been one of the major contradictions which the Assamese middle-class has grappled hard to contain.

Insensitivity of the Assamese Leaders:

The role played by the Assamese leaders in galvanizing public opinion against the Grouping Proposals, the support received from Gandhi and the subsequent acceptance of Assam’s demand by the vacillating all-India leadership of the Congress-all contributed towards infusing the Assamese community with a new found sense of hegemony which made it increasingly insensitive to the demands of the smaller communities. It was evident that the Assamese middle-class leadership, pre-occupied as it was with the struggle to establish Assamese hegemony, had failed to respond to the growing sense of insecurity in the tribal mind. As a result, this sense of alienation came to be expressed in the growth of different tribal organisations which started demanding political power and social justice. While the movements for autonomy and separate statehood caught the

Assamese middle-class leadership somewhat unawares, it soon learnt to accept the truncation of the state, all the assertions about an undivided Assam with the peoples of the hills and the plains living in peace and harmony notwithstanding. But the initial Assamese reaction to the birth of plains tribal organisations demanding their share of political power and social status was one of antagonism, with the Assamese leaders and intellectuals continuing to assert that the plains tribes were an integral part of the Assamese society. What they failed to see was that the process of assimilation of the plains tribals into the Assamese society was being checked by a variety of socio-economic, political and historical factors (Misra, 2001: 18-19).

Tribal discontent: the brewing contradictions in the Assamese identity?

As one of the sociologists puts it, “almost all the tribals are regarded to be the remnants of primitive or ancient Mongolian migrants to this region. They established themselves in their present homeland in the remotest past. Needless to say, the tribals are undoubtedly the original natives of Assam. Even in the non-tribal dominated Brahmaputra valley today, it was the Bodo-Kachari tribals who created the first culture and civilization and in a real sense they are the first natives of the valley” (Hussain, 1987: 54).

One observes that for a long time the plains’ tribals regarded themselves as a part of the composite Assamese nationality or what could be described as sub -nationalities or national minorities within the Assamese nationality. One can point out the following reasons containing conflict for a long while,

- Relative weakness of the early tribal elites, nascent bourgeoisie and middle-class, in terms of strength and resources to completely antagonize their dominant non-tribal Assamese counterparts.
- The evolution of the tribal –identity itself as a modern political project, as part of the composite Assamese nationality, under circumstances of a unified anti-colonial struggle. Thus, the plains’ tribals had two inseparable identities simultaneously- one as tribal/ethnic groups like the Ahoms, the Chutias or the

Morans, and the other, as an inseparable part of the larger Assamese nationality. The plains' tribals together with other groups of the Assamese nationality participated in the national movement for freedom. Though the anti-colonial movement was relatively weak in Assam's hill region, however in the plains, the tribals revolted against the colonial rulers as early as in 1861.

However for reasons that we will discuss below, Assam has been experiencing tribal movements of both peaceful and violent nature, since early decades of the 20th century. These have intensified in an organized manner in the post-independence phase, thus 'signaling the very complex problems of the national minorities within the Indian social and political systems' (ibid). as a resolving move, Assam went through several reorganization of land reducing its size drastically from 147624 sq Km to 78,523 sq km. in spite of bifurcation of the Naga hills district as Nagaland in 1963, the Lushai hills district as Mizoram in 1972, the United Khasi and Jaintia hills district and Garo hills district together as Meghalaya in 1969; Assam continued with substantial number of tribal population, both in the hills and the plains. The tribals still continue to form an important component of Assam's demography, society and polity. Presently there are two hill districts in Assam- Karbi Anglong and North Cachar, inhabited mainly by Karbis and Dimasa-Kacharis respectively. These two districts have their own autonomous district councils under provisions of the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution, providing the hill tribes some degree of autonomy in managing their tribal society. Interestingly, till late the same autonomy was not extended to the plains tribals of the state. This was because "the hill tribals were acknowledged to be entirely separate from the non-tribal people in the plains, the plains tribes were seen as yet another sub-nationality of the Assamese." (Krishna Raj, 1988). Therefore, the major tribes of the Assam plains- the Bodos, the Rabhas, the Tiwas, the Mishings, the Sonowals and the Deuris had to struggle hard to get this facility and some are still fighting for it.

Genesis of Tribal Discontent in Assam:

Buildup Towards a Modern Political Identity:

A noticeable trend in the politics of the early years of the Assam Tribal League are efforts at consolidating an identity that was both modern and political in its underpinnings.

By urging the tribals to classify themselves according to their community, it instilled a new sense of identity, which was officially recognized through census and aided the emergence of a modern political identity. The consciousness about necessity to progress reinforced this identity. It revolved around the question of rights, not traditional and customary, but modern rights of education, employment and equality. Thus the tribal League by 1940's strongly entrenched the definition of 'tribes' and their 'rights'.

Significantly, one observes that the tendency of tribalism, in the sense of being an ideology that is essentially tradition bound and non-receptive of social and political modernization, was absent in the early politics of tribal organisations of Assam. The increasing political mobilisation is mainly aimed at overcoming their socio-economic oppression and cultural backwardness and attaining more political power and autonomy within the present system.

Though colonial administration was never expected to provide a people-oriented education system yet with the introduction of modern education the number of literate and educated people started increasing, albeit in a heavily uneven scale and pace, in the various segments of the composite society of Assam. Accordingly opportunities, though limited, kept expanding in the colonial state's opportunity structure. Datta has emphasised that with the spread of Christianity, expansion of education and increased scope for jobs in government establishments, the tradition bound smaller 'tribal' societies, became fraught with an untraditional segment- the 'middle-class'. And this very class of people played a pioneering role in unfolding, consolidating and then spreading an identity-consciousness among the members of their own society. In the

early stage of growth, areas of contradiction between the 'middle-class' elements of the caste Assamese and non-caste tribal societies were naturally very much minimal. But with the increase in their numbers in both types of societies, members of this 'middle-class' stood exposed to a hitherto unknown competition as placement opportunities leading to advancement in various economic spheres were not expanding at an identical pace.

On the other hand, social discriminations, and the caste based social equations gradually started pushing them away from whatever proximity they would have achieved with the caste-Assamese society. Gradually, the unresolved economic insecurity started getting a political direction. The atmosphere of neglect and indifference expedited the withdrawal process further. The 'middle-class' realized that without political power, no malady could be remedied and as a result bargaining for political power began. But no effective mechanism was evolved which could satisfy the legitimate aspirations of this 'tribal middle-class'. Instead a deliberate attempt at projecting them as mere, show pieces as in different political organisations, without giving them any real power further damaged the situation. They were never taken into confidence and the governing caste-Hindu Assamese elite in fact never seriously thought of sharing power with them. This stubborn situation was potential enough to provide motivation for them to start thinking in terms of their own political identity. Their leadership was already established in all the spheres of their respective societies and as such it was not a very difficult task for them to arouse the latent identity-consciousness among their own people and direct it towards a self-determination aspiration.

On the other hand, plainsmen belonging to a number of smaller ethnic groups of who later came to be known as 'plains tribals', had to begin their aspirations with mainly non-political focus-safeguarding cultural identity, preservation of language, choice of a script, instruction through mother tongue, continuation of English as medium of instruction in higher education, etc. And after completing varying periods on probation, each of them graduated to the next higher stage and all the above demands culminated into a political demand-a separate political identity. On this question however, one observes that all the plains tribes groups did not precede at an identical speed. There were variations in the degree of assertions among them. Some demanded scheduled tribe status; some

demanded a partnership in a feudal structure, while some others demanded autonomous state. But whatever might have been the level of aspiration and the degree of assertion, the middle-class and the student youth-force were able to mobilize the people of their respective societies and what began apparently as a sense of deprivation among few gradually spread as a sense of deprivation of the whole society. Interestingly, “the major pre-conditions of a movement-collective mobilisation and orientation towards change—thus fulfilled, the important question of ‘sustenance’ was ironically left to be taken care of, to a great extent by rigidity of the caste-Assamese society as also of the Indian polity” (Datta, 1993: 12).

Datta explains the phenomena of identity-consciousness among these smaller groups as

- The result of their pride in their tradition, which was perceived to be under threat.
- Also as “defense mechanisms against the designs of legitimizing a system of deprivation which they thought was victimizing them to a point of no return” (ibid: 12-3).

However it was soon realized that identity-consciousness alone was not sufficient to protect them from the alleged onslaught of a political-economy of which they were compelled to be partners. Necessarily there arose the need for identity-assertions as well to provide them some elbow room within the existing system. Thus, consciousness of a few became consciousness of a larger society and identity assertion developed into a demand for substantial political right including even self-determination, in instances.

The Broad Points of Tribal Discontent:

To understand the volatile situation of ethnic-clashes in Assam, one has to understand the historical trajectory giving rise to these developments

A. Issue of Political Representation:

The beginning of the political discontent can be traced as far back as to 1912 when the legislative council headed by the chief commissioner for Assam’s administration was

created. The Bodos and other plains tribals were not represented in the council. Since then the issues which began to agitate the minds of the tribal people of the plains of Assam were the maintenance of separate identity, participation in the political and administrative affairs in the state, appointment in the government and semi-government jobs, availability of adequate scope and facilities for education.

Things did not improve much for the plains tribes' representation in the state assembly in the post-independence period as well, where they were kept marginalised with a nominal representation in terms of limited reservation of seats for them, 12 seats in the assembly of 126 seats. Moreover, it is observed that the parliamentary and assembly constituencies have been so delimited that the non-tribals form majority even in compact tribal areas. This and maneuvering demarcation and restructuring of districts of the state to reduce the political strength of the tribals, "shows how the Assamese middle class all throughout and in all possible ways have been monopolising the control politics, administration and all kinds of privileges and fruits of independence" (Mosahary, 2002: 150).

B. Immigration and Tribal Land Alienation:

As immigrants were historically rehabilitated by the government into the lands that historically belonged to the tribals, the instances of heavy immigration created problem of tribal land alienation in an alarming proportion, leading to the deterioration of the tribal economy. Under such situation, lands of the tribal people became a disposable and exchangeable commodity. There have been instances of both permanent and temporary land loss, which drove the tribal populace to acute economic hardship. This in turn gives rise to the problems of widespread and chronic indebtedness. Besides, this condition of poverty coupled with illiteracy has limited the economic mobility of the tribals into other profitable economic activities of business, contracts etc.

Landlessness was also a factor alienating the tribals further within the Assamese society. Being primarily agricultural; land was the very lifeline for the tribal communities. Right from the days of colonial plantation economy, various waves of industrialization and mechanizations usurped the bulk of the traditional tribal land holdings, by a corroborative caste Hindu bureaucracy (Sarma, 2006: 119). A study in 1988 by the

Assam Tribal League shows that the 37 tribal belts and block covers 65% of the whole population of Assam. However, governments own admission shows rampant non-implementation of Assam Land and tax regulatory Act. It was observed that the officials meant to implement and protect the aforesaid clauses for tribal belt and blocks have joined hands with land encroachers further transferring the tribal lands to non-tribals. In 1972, a memorandum was submitted to the Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi by the Plains Tribe League which complained “the plains tribals of the state have been systematically, in a planned manner uprooted from their lands and the step-motherly treatment towards them by the Assamese people turned the tribals into second class citizens”. Thus, we see that activities of the upper caste influenced state administration have eliminated the tribals from the Assamese society. The problem of land alienation has pushed the tribals deeper into poverty, unemployment and debt-trap. They have been ceaselessly struggling against the perpetual burden of poverty and exploitation. The government admits that the planning and land reform policies adopted by the government under constitutional provisions to safeguard the tribals’ socio-economic and cultural life were either neglected or implemented reluctantly due to resistance from the vested interests. (Government of Assam, 1974). The same vested interests groups did “thrive on the ignorance of the tribals and took full advantage of them” (Government of India, 1960).

C. Inadequate Safeguards:

Amelioration of the tribal condition and the safeguarding of their interests was sought through the creation of the tribal belts and blocks and their lands protected through the application of the Chapter X of the Assam-Land Revenue Regulation Act of 1886 as amended in 1893 and 1947. The chapter X of the act as included in the act in 1947 was intended to provide protection to the backward classes, more particularly the tribal land from alienation and encroachment by the non-tribals. Accordingly, the Government of Assam constituted 45 tribal belts and blocks throughout the plains and districts of Assam covering a total area of about 1,25,28,320 bigha. However, one finds this act being exploited in a big way by various vested interest groups.

A. The article 166 and 167 of the act provide enough loopholes for its indiscriminate violation. Taking advantage of which, the government and the non-government agencies as well as the non-tribal encroachers that include the non-bonafide outsiders have alienated lands from the tribals within the tribal belts and the blocks. In 1973-74, 200 hectares of land changed ownership from tribals to non-tribals in the protected tribal belts. About 1000 hectares of Government land was encroached upon during the same period in the tribal belts by the non-tribals. (Hussain, 1994:188).

B. At various points the Government of Assam have settled scores of immigrants into the arable and non-arable tribal lands within the protected belts, citing different grounds.

1. The planning of various industrial set-ups has displaced thousands of tribal peasants without proper rehabilitation or compensation in other alternative settlement.
2. The Government of Assam time and again has deconstituted (dereserved) large number of belts and blocks at different times, with or without due notifications.

Thus the vested interest groups through their monetary, legal and technical domination have either stalled the implementation of the protective laws or manipulated it to their advantage. This led the Dhebar Commission appointed by the Government of India in 1960 to look into the issue of tribal land –alienation in Assam, to say:

“Broadly speaking, the plains tribals have not been receiving much attention. Behind all this, there is a lack of proper, adequate and suitable institutional framework” (Dhebar Commission Report, 1960, vol 1, p. 22-23).

D. Lack of Jobs and Other Social Opportunities:

The state government which is the highest source of employment being controlled by the high caste Assamese middle-class has been depriving the educated tribals from adequate share of employment, even from their statutory share. There has been conscious non-fulfillment of the posts reserved for tribal categories, by keeping it vacant and thus creating a backlog. In this backdrop it is significant to observe the persistent prominence

of demands for job reservations, employment opportunities, and against job discrimination by various tribal student groups in the state.

E. Salience of Ethnic Markers:

1. **Religion:** Through religious propagation and religious conversion (often in the name of social reforms) there was a conspiracy to wipe out any distinct tribal identity. This becomes significant in the light of the growing trend in the mid 20th century onwards of the Assamese of registering themselves as tribals itself in the population census instead of under religious categories as Hindu, Buddhist or Christians. In this context, it was interesting to observe the congruence of opinions of Assam Congress, Assamese press of the time with the Hindu communal organizations like 'the Hindu Mahasabha'. Also interesting to observe is the strong opposition put up by the tribal leadership against plans by caste Hindu leadership of Assam Congress for a substantial Hindu migration to counter the Muslim immigration into the state from places like Mymensingh. They countered that such Hindu migration from outside would endanger the interest of Assamese Hindu, Muslim, tribes and all.
2. **Language:** Assamese middle-class associations and journals and newspapers had a vision of forming one Assamese nationality where all participant ethnicities will merge at the cost of their unique existence. Contrary to this, the tribal leadership believed that one can be a good tribal and a good Assamese too. Therefore, when the Assamese leadership rejected concepts of dual identities demanding unitary (Assamese) identity, then tribal leadership declared unitary (tribal) identity too.

However, the ruling Congress party (though with the electoral considerations) in the 1960s was reluctant about implementing the state language act making Assamese the sole official language in the state. Speaking on the floor of the state Assembly on the 3rd March, 1960, the then Chief Minister B.C. Chaliha said, "Perhaps these are two important reasons which warrant enactment on a state language. The first is to make the official communications easily understandable to the common man, and the second is to break the barrier of language which now separate the diverse population of Assam. Government would prefer to wait till they get the same demand from the non-Assamese

speaking population for declaration of Assamese as a state language. Government feels that this question should be judged more from the point of view of appreciation and acceptance than from the point of view of majority or minorities. If this is decided only on the basis of majority or minority, Government is afraid that its object would be defeated.

(1) We must be able to form a united community of all the people living in Assam and this would be possible only through natural respect and appreciation between all sections of the people.

(2) We have to give much greater attention for economic progress let the responsibility be shared by the Government and the people equally (Doley, 2007: 52-54).

However, at the insistence of the Assamese middle-class, the Assam official language act, 1960, was passed. Later though under duress from different ethnic groups, the state government had to accede to different tribal language such as Bodo as medium of instruction in specific areas. However one finds allegation that, “It has been observed that schools which have accepted Bodo language as medium of instruction have been facing severe discrimination and utter neglect from planners and administrators. Most of the Bodo medium schools are largely under staffed and ill-equipped to provide proper education to the tribal students, and this situation of the Bodo educational institutes would keep the Bodo tribals always educationally backward. The Bodo have secured officially the rightful place for their language and this ought to be preserved” (Mosahary, 2001: 166).

F. Caste Discrimination:

Indeed, colonialism had created conditions in Assam favorable for creating a modern nationality such as promotion of modern education, common market systems for different groups. At the same time however, colonialism created in Assam modern reactionary political trends by following a policy of erosion and retention. British

advocated the Brahminical feudal trends and practices. This nexus between imperialism and Brahmanism severely damaged the process of nationality formation in Assam.

A basic examination into the acts of initial dictionary writings in Assamese, hailed as milestones of Assamese cultural life-world, reveals the subtle casteist nuances creeping into Assamese middle-class ethos. A dictionary is an institute through which the hegemonic class/caste gives the social connotations to the words and connects them to a particular social context. In this sense, position of a community in the dictionary perhaps reflects their position in society. We see that in Assam the dictionary writing has been an instrument of linguistic nationalism, by constantly stigmatizing and deriding the non-caste groups. As a middle-class endeavor it had only cemented Casteist chauvinist tendencies through its particular treatment meted out to the backward groups and castes.

The Bodos for example rejects the assumptions and presumptions of Assamese society being caste-free. “The Assamese society consists of elements which have been Aryanised⁴ in their totality. The most vital point of disagreement between the Assamese society and the tribal societies is that theirs is a Caste conscious society where as the tribal societies are devoid of casteism, nor do they (tribals) consider themselves as a low class people of the so called composite Assamese society”(Mosahary, 2002: 162).

G. Fear of Uneven Development and Mistrust:

The uneven development under a colonial modernity has sowed seeds of inter-community mistrust in Assam.

“The Assamese society and its culture are far more advanced whereas the tribal people are mostly backward and depressed. In fact, the problem of the tribal people of Assam that they face today is one of less developed community living side by side with more advanced community under common political and administrative system in which the advanced section of the people take upper hand and monopolise all social facilities with the result that the poor become

⁴ . Bodo organisations like ABSU have contended that the predominant sections of the ‘Assamese’ community are of the Aryan racial stock and as such the cultural norms of the community is predominantly Aryan. Thus cultural norms of the tribal population of the state, either Mongoloid or Caucasian only, gets suppressed.

poorer and the depressed become more depressed, and the gap between them goes on widening. The backward tribal people today are subjected to the evils of uneven levels of societies in terms of social, economic, cultural and political development”(Mosahary , 2002: 158-159).

It is also true that several of the plains tribals may be said to have acquired a dual “nationality” or identity in the sense that many of them considered themselves to be both tribal and Assamese. But with the majority of the tribes, this sense of solidarity came under severe strain once the Assam Accord was signed. They came to view the Accord as a move intended to safeguard only the identity of the Assamese-speaking people, while totally ignoring the grave dangers posed to the tribal identity, chiefly because of land alienation. Although clause 10 stated that “It will be ensured that the relevant laws for prevention and encroachment of the government land and lands in the tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws”, yet it did not take much time for the tribal leadership to realize that neither the Assam Movement leaders nor the Central government really meant business on this point. Moreover, the question of providing ‘constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards...to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people” (Clause 6), once again opened up the debate as to whether the tribal communities of the state, many of whom were part of the greater Assamese community, were really Assamese? The question of merely safeguarding the identity of the Assamese speaking people of the state seemed unacceptable to them, many of whom felt they were more indigenous Assamese themselves.

Phases of Tribal Discontent: Through Student and Other Bodies

The first concrete plains tribal aspirations may be traced back to January 4, 1929 when four memorandums were submitted to the Simon Commission. But that was a phase of protectionist behaviour. Autonomy aspirations of the plains tribals however required about four more decades to be articulated and in fact in February 27, 1967 with the birth of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam a distinct phase began.

All Assam Plains Tribal League:

On 17 April 1933, tribal organisations advocating tribal welfare like the Kachari Sanmilan, Muttock Sanmilan, Rajbanshi Sanmilan integrated into All Assam Plains Tribal league. This was a landmark development for the struggle of the plains tribes in Assam for their development and recognition, to ensure political safeguards and socio-economic justice jeopardized by the discrimination of the high caste Assamese middle-class as well as the incessant flow of the immigrants, mostly from the East Bengal.

These tribal organisations petitioned before the Simon Commission (1927-29) for separate electorate for the plains tribes, provision for compulsory free education for the tribals, special scholarship for the higher education of the tribals, reintroduction of the Inner Line system to check the unrestricted flow of the immigrants from East Bengal to the tribal areas of Assam.

Significantly one of the demands was not to transfer the District Goalpara from Assam to West Bengal as considered by the British administration, a demand which had the full support of Assamese middle-class and which 'sounded music to their ears', (Sharma, 2005: 120). This also goes to show that tribal aspirations of the time were at a stage where they could still find some common ground with those of Assamese middle-class.

After the formation of the league in 1933, submitted a memorandum to the Constituted Assembly demanding the creation of the scheduled areas for the plains tribals under the fifth schedule of the constitutional provision.

On 27 February 1967, through pro-active initiatives by All Bodo Student Union (ABSU), the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was created. The declared aims and objectives of the PTCA were to secure autonomy for the plains tribals of the state in the form of a union territory under the name Udayachal. Later in the wake of the Government of India proposed plan of the reorganization of Assam, known as the federal plan, the PTCA for the first time raised the demand for a separate state for the plains tribals of Assam, on 19 May, 1968. This step gave a new dimension to the state politics, tribal, non-tribal both.

However, post 1977 general election, where PTCA fared well through active student support, the leadership of PTCA denounced the issue of a separate tribal state, 'to fulfill their selfish gain.' This shift in their position caused an irreparable rift between the ABSU and the PTCA, the former considering this step as a betrayal and selling out of the cause of the plains tribes including Bodos for the selfish gains of the PTCA leaders, and went ahead on its own with the agitation for the separate state under the name and style 'Bodoland'.

Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), which stood for the Barmans of Cachar, the Bodo-Kachari, the Deoris, Hojais, the Kacharis including the Sonwals, the Lalungs, the Meches and the Rabhas, submitted a memorandum to the President of India on May 20, 1967 demanding full autonomy in the predominantly tribal areas of the northern tract of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar Districts including all the Tribal belts and Blocks of those areas so that the tribals can :a) adequately protect their land, b) give effective check to the economic exploitation of the tribals by the non-tribals, c) conserve their language, culture, customs and what is best in them, d) prevent political domination of tribals by non-tribals and imposition of anything which would disrupt their traditions and customs, and e) grow according to their own genius and traditions.

PTCA demand for an Autonomous Region in 1967 was upgraded to a demand for Udayachal, a Union Territory in 1973. But in 1977 the topmost leadership of PTCA announced their withdrawal of the demand for Union Territory in favour of the earlier Autonomous Region demand. This announcement (by the PTCA leaders who were with the Janata Dal after the national emergency) shocked the diehards and within a span of about two years they organized themselves under the plains Tribal Council of Assam (Progressive) shortly known as PTCA(P). The demand of the PTCA (P) was for a Union Territory called Mishng Bodoland and they submitted a number of memoranda to the Prime Minister between 1980-83.

In 1984 PTCA(P) was dissolved and a new organisation was floated with the name United Tribals Nationalist Liberation Front (UTNLF) which too in support of its demand for a Union Territory named Tribal Land submitted a number of memoranda between 1984 and 1990.

Conclusion:

One can surmise that the discourse on identity in Assam is predicated on the contestations between the two powerful ideologies of nationalism, civic and ethnic. Interestingly we see that not only the politics of the state is moved by the alignment of the different nationality groups in either of the camps but for some groups the issue is strategic in essence and hence situational. Thus we see the dominant Assamese nationalism, espoused by AASU, with the backing of the Assamese middle-class, making an eventful detour from ethnic to civic nationalism, out of the situational exigencies.

The quest for Assamese identity has indeed taken new and exciting turns. In the flow of history, Assamese nationalism has reached a stage, where its reach has shrunk to the expanse of the Brahmaputra valley alone, and here too it has to adjust its space with other smaller ethnic groups. Whereas in the natural course of events, it would mainly have been the different plains tribals communities of the Brahmaputra Valley (and maybe a few other tribes like the Karbis and the Dimasas as well) which would have finally become a part of the broader Assamese nationality, now it is the immigrant Muslim who has succeeded in finding a major berth within the Assamese nationality. Misra rightly observes, "It seems to have been a quirk of history that Assamese over-zealousness in protecting their language and linguistic identity eventually led to an irredentism which went to a long way in alienating the tribal communities, while at the same time opening its doors to that very section of people against whom the indigenous Assamese have been agitating for almost a century now" (Misra, 2001: 78).

Thus, it is significant that while, on the one hand, the parameters of the Assamese identity are expanding to include the immigrants, the tea-tribes and even the Nepalese, on the other the alienation of the plains tribals seem complete. With more and more immigrant Muslims joining the Assamese community, the alienation which is intricately related to the land issue, is bound to grow further. The indigenous Assamese still seem to be nourishing the illusion that the tribal content of their society is even today very central. The reality seems otherwise.

It is true that multiculturalism inherent in Assamese society, that evolved through its peculiar geo-political location and with a liberal and relatively egalitarian Mahapurusiya Vaishnavism at its core, has been able to accommodate the new entrants. But, in the face of continued influx and demographic change, this accommodative power is bound to come under great strain. With the constant flux in its demographic composition, the cultural parameters and taproots of the Assamese identity are bound to undergo changes.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF STUDENT MOVEMENTS IN ASSAM: SOME PROMINENT ORGANIZATIONS

A study on the student power or student politics in Assam has to focus on the fact that the emergence of the student as a political category and as agency of social change in the region has been essentially an outcome of the particular socio-political developments that unfolding in the course of the historical making of the region. In lieu of this, the previous chapter focused on the historical-analytical framework to examine the process of nationality formation in Assam. The present chapter places the evolution of student politics in Assam against such a background and critically examines the process that puts student power in a position of decisive strength in the discourse of identity in the state.

For the sake of analytical clarity it would be appropriate to work out the chapter into following phases

- The phase of early politicisation: nationalism and anti-colonial struggles.
- Phase of contestation and consolidation: the early decades of post-independence.
- Phase of ethnisisation: the Assam movement and after.

Section one

The Early Phase of Politicisation: Nationalism and Anti-Colonial Struggles

To understand the germination of students' politics in Assam, it is essential to look into the socio-economic conditions in the early colonial period of Assam. As discussed

earlier, the period marks an imposition of a new capitalist economy on a pre-colonial economy which was economically backward, socially unstratified and semi-tribal in nature with under-developed markets and a very low level of monetisation. Lack of organisation and formidable leadership amongst the local labour and peasantry and their unfamiliarity with the system of monetisation perhaps explains the effortless suppression of the few peasant uprising that occasionally occurring at places like Rangiya, Lachima, Phulaguri and Patharughat particularly between the period 1860-1890s in the state.

We notice that the Assamese students of the 19th century not only represented the feudal and the gradually evolving middle-class ethos, but also carried forth the foundation and the formation of middle-class political thinking and activities in Assam.

Calcutta by the end of the 19th century had become the germinating bed of the evolving Assamese middle-class political activities and the last bastion of Assamese feudal residues. Towards the last decades of the 19th century, the gradual ascendance of the Assamese middle-class had begun to foretell an early glimpse of a compromising non-struggling politics. Dr. R C Kalita in this context has raised the question that “In a country politically subjugated, love for freedom by its people must have been seen as the ultimate sinful mutiny, otherwise why would the rebels against imperialistic oppression in the 19th century by people in the number of peasant rebellion not create any ripples in the minds of the Assamese students?” (Kalita, 1986: 14) (Translation mine).

In the early phase that is 1826-1916, the role of Assamese students in nation building primarily centered around and was limited to linguistic, literary regeneration and growth. The ideology was chiefly, linguistic cultural nationalism that was not politically aligned and was yet to take any anti-imperialist character. Instead the Assamese seemed to have hailed the British governmental systems as the ideal for progress and prosperity. Thus, dedication and service to language, literature, culture on the one hand and hand, obedience and co-operation with the colonial rule on the other, were the two hallmarks of Assamese nationalism of that phase. However, this perspective was not unique to the Assamese students. It was in fact the influence of the rising Assamese middle-class of the era which was an eager recipient of the perceived benefit of the colonial rule. This is often termed as a substantial failure of the Assamese renaissance and a ‘fault’ in

perspective by some historians (Ibid: 205) . However, one comes across another perspective that looks at it as a part of a larger process of an evolving Assamese cultural nationalism which within a few years begins to form formidable association with Indian nationalism, assuming confrontationist anti-colonial political overtones. (Sarma , 1990). In this regard , A. C. Hazarika observes that when in 1885 a few Indian thinkers had ‘given birth’ to the Indian National Congress for national development, almost at the same time a few Assamese students were getting agitated about the development of Assamese literature as being central to the progress of Assam and Assamese (Hazarika, 1960: 4). It can thus be argued that in reality the character of these two lines of thinking were the same, as it reflected a significant aspect of student movements in the pre-independence period which was their association with the ideology of Indian nationalism in the late nineteenth and first few decades of the twentieth century (Sarma, 2002: 56).

The Asom Chattra Sanmilan: “From Nascent to Militant Nationalism.”⁵

The formation of the Asom Chattra Sanmilan in 1916 was an unprecedented event in the history of student activism not only in Assam but for the whole of India as the socio-political activism on the part of the Assamese students predates even the formation of the Indian National Congress. The Sanmilan in fact reflected the ideas of early nationalism, both Indian and Assamese very lucidly in its aims, objectives and activities.

Thus, the ideology articulated by the Asom Chattra Sanmilan cannot be seen as specific to the students alone. It has to be seen in a much wider perspective of capitalism and colonialism and the situation of Assam in particular.

Two important trend of the period is summed up succinctly by the following observations:

1. “Although students played an important role in non-cooperation, civil disobedience, Boycott of Simon commission, ‘the Asom Chattra Sanmilan’ as an

⁵ . We find the use of the phrase ‘from nascent to militant nationalism’ coined by historian Manorama Sarma to describe the phase of social transition under early student agitations in Assam, very apt and useful. See Sarma, 1990, 2002.

organisation did not formally participate or associate itself with political nationalist programme” (Deka, 1996: 72).

2. “The students of Assam had succeeded in imbibing an enthused spirit of nationalism engulfing the whole province; a nationalism to which all patriotic people of Assam could adhere to without questioning...this period of student nationalism...will go down in history of the student movement as a distinctive era with enormous symbolic importance”(Bora, 1992: 61-62).

Manorama Sharma (Sharma, 2002: 57-59.) undertakes a close scrutiny of the speeches of the Secretaries of the Reception Committee of the Assam Chattra Sanmilian over a period of time, in order to ‘assess this organisation not only against the background of events and activities of the time, but primarily to see the organisation in the perspective of a phase of historical evolution’(ibid). The observation truly revealing reflects the evolving trends, political consciousness and consolidation of the students of Assam.

From 1916 to around 1923, almost every address of the secretaries, made reference to the ideals of nationalism in general and Assamese nationalism in particular with emphasis on revival of Assamese identity and language, and protection and development of Assamese literature.

In 1917, Krishna Kanta Hadique in his Secretary’s address stressed upon the fact that the Sanmilian was not separate from the national life of Assam. Referring to historian Freeman’s idea of the unity of history, he said that just as countries could not have self-contradictory histories, similarly in national life also there could not exist different divisions (like student’s committee, Peasant’s committee or teacher’s committee) contradictory to each other. The Assam Chattra Sanmilian in part represented Assam’s future that was being built through the student’s attempt to equip themselves for a national life through development of literature, language etc. Although the immediate attention of the Sanmilian centered around spreading national literature, its future activities could be much wider. Referring to the inter-disciplinary nature of knowledge, he tried to put across the main idea that through true education students could make themselves more relevant to society (Hazarika, 1960: 250-251).

The addresses of the secretaries from 1921 to 1928 evinced a stronger expression of nationalism. The year 1928 can be said to be a watershed as the 14th conference of the Sanmilan 'led to the deletion of the rule 1(a) of the constitution of the Sanmilan prohibiting political discussion'(Bora, 1992: 58).

While recording the history of the Sanmilan S. Bora speaks highly of its role as being the guiding light and a legacy running through the very soul of the Assamese society and the present day student politics. "The traditional role of the Assam Chattra Sanmilan as the forerunners of the struggle for the existence of the Assamese people, relentlessly pursued even in the hay day of the National Freedom Movement, continues to be the guiding light for the students of Assam. Even today they are raising questions in our minds as the various student agitations of the post-Independence era like the language movements of the 1955, 1958 and 1960, the refinery movement from 1969-71 and the foreigners movement of 1979-83 are all a legacy of the Assam Chattra Sanmilan. One cannot but observe a central movement of Assam right from the inception of the Assam Chattra Sanmilan to the turbulence of the present day activities of the All Assam Student's Union – the instinct for the survival of the Assamese people as a distinct identity" (Bora, 2002: 91-92).

Bora could be right in a sense that the early predominance of the middle-class ethos with their characteristic radicalism and counter-radicalism, became an established feature of the dominant student politics of the Assamese society in the days to come.

Phase of Intense Politicisation:

The series of student protests and movements up to the 1930s provided conducive conditions for different forms of student movements. It marked the rise of a new wave of revolutionary terrorism which also seemed to penetrate into the campuses. "The campus at this stage provided a good recruiting ground for political parties such as the Congress, the Congress Socialist and the Communists for the simple reason that the students played important roles in mobilizing the political movements over the years, contributed much towards its success and therefore would serve as ready recruits for new programme and ideologies of the various parties." By the 1930s the organizational structure of the

student organisation percolated down to the grassroots student population of Assam and also gained a legacy of the successful extension of the nationalist programme (Interview of G.S. Bhattacharjee in Deka 1996: 242.)

The working unity between the students of Assam (the Assam Students Federation) and the workers during the 1939 Digboi Oil strike reflects the Marxist line of recognizing the students as potential revolutionaries in genuine solidarity of the repressed classes .

Herbert Marcuse (Marcuse, 1969), argues that as a result of a process of social adjustment under conditions of affluence, the working class had been integrated into the established society and hence revolutionary action initially cannot come from the left. He regards as potential revolutionaries those young people who reject the prevailing values and norms of society and have lost connection with the power structure. In highly industrialized nations, the student-workers alliance requires an intensive organisation since even conflicts have been institutionalised as a result of trade-unionism.

In Assam, the early student-workers alliance in a situation of colonisation and economic backwardness, with little-industry and local labour, is unique and significant. Deka sees it as a consequence of internalisation of communist ethos by the student groups as well as retaliation to colonial oppression (Deka M, 2002:107).

Early Attempts to Widen the Social Base:

The year 1939 marks an important year the history of the student movement of Assam. The first impact of the growing friendship between the tribal students and the students of the plains was felt when Shillong was chosen as the venue of the first session of the All Assam Student's Federation to be held in July, 1940. The first resolution of the conference condemned the war as imperialistic and called for unity of the students of the hills and the plains in their pledge to carry on a determined struggle against imperialism for saving the nation from economic and political exploitation and the students from the restrictions on their academic liberty. The most interesting feature of the meeting was a resolution moved by a Manipuri student Ranbir Singh, demanding forthwith the establishment of a full-fledged residential university in Assam and authorizing the New

Working Committee of the All Assam Student's Federation to take all possible steps to implement this resolution.

This was one of the most important legacy, that was to be very influential for student movements in the region in the days to come. The attempt of the left student groups, prominently the Assam Student' Federation to broaden its base by assimilating the hill students into its fold. As it is recorded, contrary to the limited success of the political parties both Congress and the Communists, the student federation was relatively successful in establishing working contacts with the hill students in the various colleges of Assam and Calcutta. In 1943-44 Assam Hills Students Association was formed in Calcutta and then under the initiative of the Assam Students Federation, the Assam Hills Students Federation was formed in Assam. This organisation cooperated with the Assam Provincial Students' Federation and organised the All Assam Students Educational Conference in Shillong in 1946.

However, historians like Guha maintain, "the communist influence on the Christian Hills students was neither stable nor deep. Further, the hill students were allegedly not attracted by the Communist ideology but by the communist approach to the national question in the face of their fear of domination by the plains people after independence. The soviet concept of a multinational state, in which each nationality had a formal right to secede, and of autonomous regions, appealed to the hill students (Guha A. 1977: 299). This tendency clearly reflects the inability on the part of the dominant left movements to grasp the issues of identity and autonomy felt by the marginalised groups and their insensitivity to signs of early ethnic consciousness of these groups.

The Brief Ascendance of the Left Student Groups:

It is significant to note that by 1939 the predominant student organisation of Assam the 'Assam Chatra Sanmilan' got affiliated to the dominant leftist student group of the country, the All India Students Federation. This was a clear indication of the growing influence of the leftist ideas and ideology on the student society in Assam.

Talking about rapid ascendance of left student movements in Assam, Meeta Deka highlights the openness of students groups for being intellectuals receptive to dominant ideas. “Intellectuals can overcome class consciousness. Therefore any consciousness which is dominant at the plane of ideas would automatically influence the minds of those who are engaged in any intellectual activity and students being an intellectual group are therefore open to leftist ideas which were acquiring a dominant position in nearby Bengal. Thus the prominent rule assigned to the student community derives from the fact that they are less attached than most other members of society to any particular social group and hence truly committed towards left party activities” (Deka, 2002: 96).

However one finds a few explanations for inability of the left movements, despite the early start, to establish hegemony over the student community in Assam.

One prominent one is the vacillating nature of leadership of the movement, ridden with internal conflicts and party-swings, often influenced by changes in international communist lines. As Altbach points out, as the tone of the movement is often shaped by the leadership positions, it more important to observe the ideological inclination of the leadership (Altbach, 1987:130).

Also, the leadership of the left movement in Assam was in early years in significant ways if not entirely ‘imported’ or ‘influenced’ from Bengal. A fact that did not go down well with ethnically charged students of the later years. Talking in the context of the Assam movement, Gail Omvedt writes, “Is the CPI (M) really based only among the Bengalis in Assam? If this is true after 50 years of Communist presence in the area, then isn’t it understandable that the Assamese people find it hard to understand what communism means?”(Omvedt, letter to editor, EPW, vol.XV, No.12, March 22, 1980: 580).

Left student Movements vis-à-vis the Congress student movements shows that the latter’s success was due to the fact that the Congress had a much wider base with popular support of the rural areas including the tribal peasantry. Moreover, it is significant to note the Assamese Muslim student leaders of lower middle-class and peasant origin had came under significant influence of the Muslim League during the decades before Indian independence.

Also it is argued that the middle-class mentality as pro status-quo and safe-play is accused of diminishing the interest of Assamese students, primarily middle-class in composition, towards left movements (Deka, 2002: 112).

Although the Left student movement could not establish hegemony over the entire student community, the left student movement radicalized the student movement in general and also gave it a varied nature and character, claiming success in areas where the Congress students failed.

As we would argue, it was a tendency of totalizing the social reality under a rigid theoretical framework which lacked cultural-historical sensitivity that stifled the early growth of this strand of student movement in Assam.

Section two

Phase of Contestation and Consolidation: The Early Post-Independence Decades

The Volatile Period Till the Assam Movement: The Prelude

As we have discussed set up in 1916 as a non-political organisation the Asom Chattra Sanmilan (Assam Students' Conference or ASC) functioned side by side with 'the Asom Sahitya Sabha', established the following year, focusing on general problems involving the culture and education of the Assamese people. With the rise of the National Congress after 1921, the Sanmilan became politicized and mobilized students against colonialism. In 1939, it was formally affiliated to the All-India Students' Federation (AISF).

The Sanmilan, the student wing of Assam State Congress, cut itself off from the AISF and became known in 1942 as the All India Students' Congress (AISC). During the 1942-45, the ASC was replaced by the AISF and the AISC- the latter having been founded around 1942. By the early 1950s, the AISC branch in Assam disappeared, while the AISF became a cadre institution for the Communists.

Between 1939 and 1967 student politics in Assam was not represented by a single body, but by a number of rival organisations (as seen particularly during the 1956-57 Refinery Movement and the 1960 Official Language movement) such as All-Gauhati College Students' Union, Gauhati University Students' Union, etc., all of them playing by and large anti-colonial role during British rule. It is from a feeling that unification might redress students' grievances in Assam, as in other states that the general secretaries of different student organisations met at a Conference in 1967 and formed the All Assam Student's Union (AASU). Despite the existence of a number of oppositional political parties (such as the CPI, RCPI, Forward Bloc), apart from the all dominant Congress party, and joint collaboration of the opposition parties⁶, the AASU, played a prominent role during the Food and Anti-SRC Movements (1966-68) and also during the Second Refinery Movement (1970), and eventually elbowed these national parties out of these Movements. (Bora, interviewd in Deka, 1996: 252).

Thus A.K. Baruah classifies the student movements in Assam in the first two decades of post-independence period under the categories of,

- Struggle over economic issues
- Struggle launched for the protection of the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people (Baruah, 2002: 190).

Students in Assam have launched four important movements over economic issues.

1. Oil refinery movement of 1957.
2. The food agitation movement of the 1966.
3. The second oil refinery movement, 1969.
4. The anti-price rise movement.

These movements focused on the various aspects of the industrial backwardness of Assam, questioning the colonial hinterland status of the state (Misra, 1982) and reflected the distress and anxiety of the Assamese middle-classes over the scarcity of jobs.

⁶. Six political parties in the state had formed the 'Samyukta Andolan Parishad' (SAP) to agitate food shortage.

The students in Assam in this phase had also launched three important struggles for the protection of the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people, cashing on a 'very sensitive string in the psyche of the Assamese middle-classes and the peasantry, the fear of the loss of identity'(Baruah,2002: 191).

In this direction three important struggle were launched.

1. The issue of official language of Assam, 1960
2. The issue of medium of instruction, 1972.
3. The agitation over the foreign nationals issue in the late 1970s.

Ascendance of AASU: Rise of Middle-Class Politics or Rising Student Consciousness?

The emergence of AASU as the platform for powerful student movements reached its pinnacle with the prolonged and intense years of the Assam Movement (1979-1985). However what assumes special interest for our study is the significant course the organisation traverses in the eventful ten to twelve years from its inception in the late 1960s till the volatile years of late 1970s, years of warming up towards a movement on a mass-scale.

We will argue that this was a phase of significant transformation not only for AASU, but for the subsequent course of the student movements in Assam in general. It marks a clear shift of emphasis, ideological articulation and focus on the part of the dominant student politics of the state.

For sociologists like Monirul Hussain, it was the lack of substantial roots among the peasants and the working class, and distance from the broad-left and democratic forces in the state, that rendered AASU vulnerable of the support from the Assamese middle-class.

He further points out the significant ideological transformation that AASU goes through from its inception in 1967, throughout the eventful decade of 1970s culminating in the forming years of the anti-foreigners movement in the final years of 70s, "in order to attain a position of dominant leadership and attract the patronage of the Asamiya ruling

class” (Hussain, 1993: 106), when in the wave of popular ‘reformist’ student movements along the lines of Bihar and Gujarat, AASU in Assam came out in 1974 with agendas of progressive economic reforms like progressive, pro-peasant land reform , public sector industrialization, nationalization of big-bourgeoisie run industries, demanding procurement and distribution of all essential food-grains by the government and so on, one could see a visible lack of support from the Assamese middle-class, including the press, instrumental to the success of their former movements. The middle-class dominated press was an inseparable part of the Assamese ruling class, and as such could not support such progressive demands as land reform in the interest of the peasants and nationalization of the various sectors of the economy. The ruling class was threatened with the possibility of a movement capable of uniting all sections of the people irrespective of class, ethnicity or religion, getting critical of the structure.

Many a scholars argue that the futility of fighting for political and economic issues from within a non-political student’s organization isolated from the masses, led to ascendance of All India leftist student’s organizations like SFI in the state (Gohain 1996; Bora, 1990; Hussain, 1993).

Here it is interesting to note that during the early years of the 1970s the left student’s organisations have increased their influence significantly on the Assamese students. Events like the Railway strike, internal emergency, Vietnam War had created a conducive atmosphere for this growth. Despite heavy opposition to the left student forces during the phase of Assam movement, one survey shows a steady growth in the ranks of the left students groups during all those years. In 1973 the Students Federation of India (SFI) had a total membership of 4,765, in 1988 it stood at 27, 576 and by the year 1982 it became 33,177 (Bora, 2001: 339).

However, after the 1978 state assembly election AASU was activated from near oblivion by the middle-class political ambitions, and “ideologically AASU had to undergo an internal transformation from left of the centre to the right of the centre. The new coalition axiomatically reflects the class nexus involved in the Assam movement” (Hussain, 1993: 108).

Thus one observes that the immediate post-independence decades in the state were marked with issue that reflected the complexities confronting the Assamese students as responsible members of the society. The two sets of movements signify two different tendencies reflecting the evolving trend of student politics in Assam.

The first set of movements over economic issues reflects prevalence of broad-based student movements in this period that were run on broader social and political identities of the students, with only a faint reverberation of the immediate cultural contexts.

Significant influence of the left groups over dominant student groups, and not only the official student groups, in this phase has kept the predominant language these student movements one of universal liberal rights.

However, at the same time the second set of movements around issues of cultural identity, points towards a growing awareness in the students about a language of group rights as against a liberal universalisation.

What is more significant is to observe is the fact that all these movements belonging to two different nature took place over a timeframe that is almost overlapping, thus making it difficult to earmark any rigid ideological timeframe for the student movements of this phase.

Also at times the same student organisation is seen to lead movements of two different natures over a period of time, thus reflecting the changes in its own organisational command or influence. AASU is a clear case in sight.

In the next section we see the trend towards ethnisation gaining substantial momentum with the onset of the Assam movement, as it one of the most significant outcomes of the movement turned out to be to bring out in focus the ethnisation of not only the dominant ethnic group, but the minority groups in the state as well.

Section three

Phase of Ethnisation, the Assam Movement and After

The historical Assam Movement (1979-85) has to be considered extremely important for the student politics of not only Assam, but of the entire northeastern region, as it has observed that the success of Assam's student leaders in sustaining a prolonged campaign and then capturing political power inspired other student movements in the northeast (Baruah S, 1999: 187). Also that, "Sociologically speaking, the leadership of the Assam movement has become their reference group"(Hussain, 1987: 1332).

Baruah observes, "Historically sensitive analyst would recognize that the demands of protest movements are not always a matter of free choice. The AASU programme did not grow out of thin air" (Baruah, 2006: 158).

Baruah mentions the major issues leading to the situation of Assam movement as the followings, (Ibid: 158-159).

- The long history of immigration to the state of Assam.
- Unchecked illegal infiltration in the post-independence period.
- The constitutional silence on the means of protecting the historically evolved cultural character of the state.
- The support for infiltration from self-seeking politicians.

What needs to be emphasised that articulation of student power in the Assam movement and its subsequent channelisation into the institutions of power, with student leaders entering the assembly at the culmination of the movement, made an impact on the norms and aspirations of the other student movements. It was at times receptive and at times reactive depending on their location in the cultural grammar of the Assam movement. As we will discuss, whereas groups like All Bodo Students Union, a vocal opponent of dominant Assamese nationalism, sought to copy the style of AASU agitation to capture

power, AJYCP, a significant participant of the movement and votary of radical Assamese nationalism, kept distance from institutional power sharing.

AASU's Credence, A Step Towards Ethnisation of Student Politics?

The historic Assam movement took place in the wake of the fast establishing reputation of AASU as the most powerful and effective body representing mighty student power in Assam.

The Proximate Factors:

- Non-acceptability of the regional and all-India political parties and the credibility gained by AASU during the 'medium of instruction' movement in 1972, refinery movement of 1970, made AASU the right body to take on the sensitive issue of foreign nationals in Assam, where traditional political parties hesitated. It brought about an acceptability of the issue as a crucial one and lent respectability to the movement. The AASU ascendancy to the leadership position abased the divided regional political parties into secondary position and rendering national parties irrelevant. Guha observes, "It (AASU) represents the student power that has added respectability to chauvinism and a spirit of dedication to the cause" (Guha, 1985).
- The cultural underpinning of the Assam agitation was provided by the unstinted support of the Assam Sahitya Sabha. The agitation gained instantaneously in respectability from the weighty support of the Assamese intelligentsia, and this helped to bring about a mutually reinforcing unique equation between the teacher and the taught, which in a wider sense bridged the generation gap also (Chabra, 1992, p. 67).
- The AASU was cautious in avoiding any linkage with established political parties to maintain its leadership in the face of any political hijacking. However, there was conscious effort to garner support from various section of the society in Assam. "In order to pledge support to the agitation, small groups of people

engaged in particular activity would form associations and pass resolutions. A multiplication of such associations sprang up at the state, district, taluk and village level” (ibid:p.68).

- Some historians observe that apart from the spontaneity of the response from the people on the highly emotive issue and the excellent organising capability of the AASU to sustain the agitation over long periods without peaking out, an important tradition, called ‘Khel’ inherited from the Ahom system of government greatly contributed to mass mobilisation witnessed in the agitation. The Khel system was a means by which each and every adult member could take a share in the larger interest of the state. A sense of fraternity existed when people from different castes had worked in ‘Khel’ and this traditional fraternity in society at different levels as also the practice of citizen’s obligation to state under ‘Paik’ system of Ahoms found expression in the widest possible participation of the state (Chattopadhyay, 1990:65).

The Basic Factors:

- Gail Omvedt argues that, “The basic Assamese fear is not so much of losing jobs to Bengalis (or other ‘outsiders) but of losing their land. This is a much more basic issue, because it calls into question one of the defining characteristics of a nationality that of a territory; and the loss of territory to people who settle on it tends to be permanent”(Omvedt, 1980). Despite the paring down of Assam between 1961 and 1972 by about 65% (from 219,877 sq.km. in 1961 to 78,523 sq.km. in 1972), the population of residual Assam in 1972 was about 3.8 million more than 1962 (Census reports of Assam, 1961 and 1971). It is not difficult to foresee possible economic and social tensions arising out of the pressure on land- 186 persons per sq.km. according to 1971 Census-indicated by these figures. It is 221 persons per sq.km. (or 572 persons per sq.mile) for the Brahmaputra valley districts- a population density surpassed only by comparatively industrialized West Bengal, Punjab, Haryana, and Tamil Nadu. Even these figures do not provide a fair idea of the pressure on land in Assam, since only a part of the land

is allowed to be in cultivation (The Assam Tribune, June 22, 1983: 1). Vast tracts of uncultivated land as classed as 'reserved forests' or grazing reserves. The tribal blocks being closed to non-tribals, only a fraction of the estate land owned by tea-estates are under cultivation with the rest held in reserve (Statistical handbook of Assam, 1970-71, table 4.11). In view of the 1970-land policy the government of Assam in collaboration with the Panchayat (a village level administrative body) undertook during early 1970s a survey of landless persons. A study of the number of landless persons in Kamroop in 1969 reveals that the total number of such persons, 622,295, includes three categories. First, persons having no land numbered 228,833; next persons having 1.65 acres numbered 284,894; and lastly, persons having 1.65 to 2.64 acres numbered 107,568 (The Assam Tribune, March 8, 1972: 4).

- As we have observed in the previous chapter, historically, the ruling class in Assam has had both internal and external contradictions which also influence its operational relations with the Indian ruling class which naturally exploits this intra-class competition and conflicts. Since 1971 the upper-caste factions of the ruling class declined in Assam's politics as they were marginalised with the emergence of non-caste leadership of the Congress Party (Gohain and Bora,2001). Since then the upper-caste leaders were looking for an alternative organization with a new ideology to recapture their lost status in the power structure of the state. Besides emergence of the left political force as a potential alternative force to the Congress-Janata formations in Assam caused a deep alarm to the traditionalist upper-caste sections. Also the decline of Congress at the grass-root level made it easier for the disgruntled upper-castes to make inroads into the corridors of power. As Hussain writes, "their road to political power has not been straight; they had to come through a zigzag way with ups and downs. In the process they created a new ideology, and tailored it to suit their class interest in Assam. Not only had their ideology to undergo transformation but they also had to significantly transform their organizational set-up before embarking upon a massive social movement" (Hussain 1993: 107).

- One also sees the post-independence expansion of schools and colleges leading to a new social space for youth power in Assam, thus giving a solid organisational base to the political aspirations of Assamese nationalism and subnationalisms. Sanjib Baruah rightly observes, “Now there are schools in the most remote small towns and villages; colleges too are numerous. *Only predominantly Assamese-speaking schools and colleges seem to have become part of this federation-Assam’s numerous Bengali or Hindi schools are not part of the All Assam Students Union.* It is not surprising that the explosion of subnationalist politics in Assam coincides with the founding and consolidation of this organisation in the 1970s.” (Baruah, 1999: 124) (emphasis mine).
- Also, AASU can be viewed as, along with the Xobha as the institutions that give the Assamese civil society its organisational capacity. Indeed in its claim to be non-political, “a curious claim for a body that brought normal politics in the state to a standstill for five years and whose leaders then proceeded to win elections and form the government of the state in 1985” (*ibid*) , can be understood in its self-image and notion of being the trustee of interests that are of higher order than the normal politics, a sense of obligation to the civil society over a careerist notion of student politics as means for individual mobility.
- Though differing with this Marxist framework of understanding India as a multinational entity with issues of ‘self-determination’, Sanjib Baruah agrees with Omvedt in terming Assam movement as the legitimate rebellion of the Assamese civil society for self-expression, but with issues of ‘sub-nationalism’ in India’s ‘plural society’. Amalendu Guha critiques Baruah for using “concept borrowed from the neocolonialist social scientists- Chicago sociologist and Cambridge historians, for example- who attempt to deny usefulness of such categories as class and nationalism in the case of third world countries like India.

However, Assam movement was a gradual phenomena and the leadership of the students embodied in the well-knit structure of AASU was more or less intact throughout its span.

Movement and the Evolution of AASU:

After it had successfully led the medium movement, there was a qualitative change in the student body's organisational outlook owing to the Naxalite (left sectarians professing to be Marxists) infiltration between June 1975 and February 1977. Until March 1978 the AASU activities chiefly related to academic and economic issues. In August, power of the front was consolidated through capturing of college unions. "Nibaron Bora's Coup in the AASU led the Naxalites to form the United Students' organisation (U.S.O.)." The new student leadership's first mass Satyagraha program (October 24-27) against the outsiders before the Deputy Commissioner's court was followed in October 28 by a general strike. While the Satyagraha almost failed, the strike was observed mostly by students alone.

"However by the end of 1978, the AASU as the most effective mobiliser of discontented students and youth had curbed the heretofore ascendant leftist influence of the latter" (Choudhury S, 1980: 38.)

Against the partial success of the A.J.D.'s student wing- 'the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad', The Student's federation of India still controlled one half of the colleges in the Brahmaputra valley. The premiere institution Cotton College, the AASU stronghold since the late 1960s, elected a CPI-ML member as General Secretary of its Students' Union, while an SFI general secretary led the post graduate Students' Union of Gauhati University. Similar left inroads could be seen in the student union elections at Guwahati Medical College, the Assam Engineering College and J.B. College, Jorhat, to name a few. This ascendance of the left forces within the students is explained by some observers as the student protest against the statewide government repression policy during the internal emergency (June 1975- February 1977).(Chaube S.K, 1985: 35.)This growing left influence is said to spark off anti-left violence from nationalist forces. In some colleges growing tension forced the leftist's to slowly retreat (Gohain Hiren, 1980: 16- 17).

Attempts at widening the support base amongst the tribal students:

- To step up agitational activity the AASU set up its unit in Diphu and its leaders had meetings with the Karbianglong Students' Union (KASU), the Karbi

Students' Union (KSU) and the Diphu College Students Union (DCSU). An understanding was reached between the AASU and the tribal students Union of the Karbianglong district that neither side would raise any matter relating to language and that they would jointly raise demands for the establishment of an engineering institute, radio station and museum etc at Diphu. On May 21, 1982 the president of Karbianglong District Students' Union Co-ordination Committee issued a statement that all agitational programmes sponsored by the AASU relating to the foreigners issue should be supported and carried out. Following this understanding the KASU participated in the 'blackout' and the 'Students Solidarity Day' observed in June 1982.

- Another important step towards mobilising support from amongst the tribals of these two districts was the holding of the 49th session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha at Diphu from April 23 to April 25, 1982. The session made a significant contribution in assuaging the sensibilities of the tribals about the Assamese language and laid stress on making Karbi and Bodo languages as medium of instruction in schools. In a significant move, one Joy Singh Doley, a tribal from Diphu, was elected Vice-President of the Assam Sahitya Sabha for 1982-83.

Fissures in the Organizational Control of AASU:

The fratricidal communal riots during the Assam movement in 1983 have heightened the internal tension about the 'consensus' between a section of the Assamese caste-Hindu and Muslim participants of the movement.

Nurul Hussain, one of AASU's vice-presidents along with some of his colleagues in the Executive colleagues (all Muslims) was expelled from the Union. Whereas the allegation on them was of being 'pro-foreigner' and indulging in anti-organisation activities, the dissidents put AASU to task on three counts (Das, 1994, pp. 37-38),

- The movement has seriously disadvantaged the Assamese Muslims. It has taken a toll of their lives and properties, thus alienating them and hurting their sentiments.

- AASU has not taken any action either by way of instituting inquiries into or bringing into book those who have allegedly indulged in killing the Muslims on the simple ground that ‘they were Muslims’.
- The AASU president convened the Executive Council meeting without informing the Muslim leaders as its office-bearers.

The leadership of the movement had to guard against the growing internal division. The violence that took place in the wake of the 1983 assembly election, where instances of conflict broke out between ethnic Assamese opponents of the election and the plains tribal supporters, mainly the Bodos, the student leadership had to suspend the movement to concentrate on healing the ethnic rifts. (Baruah Sanjib, 1999, p.137). In January 1984 AASU held a National Convention, which was attended by a number of prominent Assamese intellectuals as well as activists of the movement, in order to search for ways and means for “regeneration of the Assamese nationality and to provide a united socio-cultural as well as political platform”(*ibid*). The emphasis on unity was recognition of the impact of the rifts.

In a second convention in December 1984, the need to adapt to the ethnic diversity of the state dominated discussions. The convention formed a committee to complete the “process of political unification of the various ethnic groups of the Assamese people.” There was discussion that stressed the need to include tea garden workers, Indian Nepalis, the tribal communities and “already assimilated religious minorities” and “like-minded Indians” in future protest actions (Misra, 1988: 110-11).

The Assam Movement: the High Point of Assamese Nationalism or A Signal of Crisis?

The leadership of the Assam Movement had shown tremendous power to mobilize the masses and build a pressure through various means, thus making themselves indispensable in any bargain. It became impossible for the Indian ruling class to not give certain concessions to the potentials of the Assamese middle-class. However, dissatisfaction of the deprived section of the Asamiya ruling class manifested strongly

when it saw a select number of high caste factions of Asamiya ruling class monopolizing the limited economic crumbs in an economically deprived state. It is to be observed being a multi-ethnic state following a particular logic of development every social group in Assam has come to have its own faction in the ruling-class, weak or strong. Naturally with the change in political situation the equation of these factions keep on changing. The inter-factional or intra-ruling class conflict has a significant bearing on the social life of the state.

Also Baruah has rightly pointed out that a good starting point to look at the effect of the turmoil on ethnic relations in Assam is to focus attention on the term “ethnic Assamese” which has become common in discussions of Assam politics since the Assam movement (Baruah, 1999: 125) The term was either nonexistent or in extremely rare use before the Assam movement.

The emergence of the term “ethnic Assamese” suggests a process that anthropologists like Abner Cohen have described as a shift from an ‘elite group’ being culturally invisible to becoming culturally visible- a result of a loss of hegemony. (Cohen, 1981: 307-31).

In a world where the Assameseness of Assam was not contested, the ethnic Assamese as a separate group were culturally invisible. However, as it can be argued the Assam movement ethnicized the Assamese and the political landscape of Assam, as different tribal and religious minority organisations began challenging the ‘assumed’ authority of the Assamese speakers to speak for Assam and its people.

One can thus observe the historical ascendance of Assamese middle-class through assertion of students politics throughout the decades of the fifties and the sixties and culminating in the powerful Assam movement spearheaded by the All Assam Students Movements (AASU), where the movement did succeed to achieve a ‘unity of purpose’ between various sections or communities in the state by articulating a cultural space that was shared by various components of the political block as a forum for mutually intelligible communication and interaction. However, it was this same value consensus of the society in Assam at that point of time that resisted the attempted ‘combative’ hegemonic drive by the middle-class through student organizations. Indeed the type of

normative understanding and consensus within various contesting components of the community due to its particular configuration determined the nature of the movement itself, a polysonic one addressing itself to a multiplicity of interests, a 'liminal event' through which the society impresses its form on its members irrespective of their status differences and generates a consensus (Turner Victor, 1990: 147-54). Indeed, the hegemonising agenda of the student movement of the 70s and 80s has proved counter-productive to the consolidating middle-class hegemony in Assam and have led to further ruptures in the shared normative consensus of the society by highlighting many a fault lines. With Assam Movement the limits of a 'majoritarian' middle-class politics in Assam strongly came to the fore and as more the student leadership became coercive in the face of critiques and challenges from different sections and classes from within the community, more they deviated from the Gramscian route of hegemony.

Hussain points out the complicated nature of the AASU led Assam movement when he writes, "AASU played the most dominant role in leading the movement. Though ostensibly it was a student's movement, it would be erroneous if we look at it merely as a student's movement. Behind the AASU stood the Asamiya bourgeoisie, their press and journalists, the rural gentry, a large section of the middle-class including some powerful bureaucrats and high police officials, the employees of the state government, contractors, transport operators, owners of Assam's popular mobile theatre groups and a few socialist and communist renegades. Significantly, the Marwaris also financed the movement liberally" (Hussain, 1993: 106).

The Issue of Identity and Two Prominent Student Groups of the Ethnic Majorities:

A. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU):

The role of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), after its emergence as a powerful platform for student politics in the 1970s, has been tremendously important in shaping the contours of subsequent student politics in Assam.

Preamble

“We, all the Students’ of Assamese, seriously determine to form a Students’ Union, irrespective of caste, colour, for organizing the students to involve them in the efforts to acquire and inculcate the sense of Brotherhood; safeguarding Social, Economic, Political Justice, freedom of Faith and Expression of Thought, Equality of Dignity and Opportunities, Regards for Personalities and National Unity.

Today, the 8th August, 1967 at 5 A.M. at the General Conference held at Tezpur, hereby accepted this Constitution and promised to implement it.”

Aims and Objectives:

Article 5 of the Constitution of the Union deals with the aims and objectives of the organisation. These are :

- 5.a) To form a Students’ Organisation without having allegiance to any Political Party.
- 5.b) To inculcate and deepen the regards for the people and state (Motherland)
- 5.c) To involve all students to free people from all forms of exploitation and cheating.
- 5.d) To encourage the Students’ community to establish Socialism and to work for all round progress of the State in particular and the community in general.
- 5.e)a. To safeguard Independence and Sovereignty of the Motherland
- 5.e)b. To safeguard the interest of the indigenous people of Assam.
- 5.e)c. To fight against illiteracy and educational discrimination and to provide scope for enjoyment and right to education for all the students
- 5.e)d. To increase political, social and cultural awareness amongst students
- 5.e)e. To remove narrow communalism and social ailment caused by caste, creed, religion etc.
- 5.e)f. Keeping in view of the national integration, co-ordination will be maintained by AASU with the Student Organisations of other States having similar aims with those of AASU.

AASU and the Politics of Identity:

One can argue that with the ascendance of AASU as the dominant actor not only of student politics but of state politics in general with the launching of the historic Assam movement, there took place a substantial change in the discourse of student politics in Assam. A language of group rights over concerns for universal rights starts to predominate the discourse of student politics in Assam, henceforth.

The various issues and instances of mobilisation staged by AASU during the course of the movement can be viewed as what political scientist like Sanjib Baruah have called 'subnationalist' as these political mobilisations with significant overtones of Assamese nationalism stood in a dialogical relationship with pan-Indian politics, and were animated by India's constitution, laws, public philosophy, and political processes (Baruah, 1999:5). Thus, in a sense, these protests and movements were largely shaped up by the pan-Indian cultural grammar.

Sanjib Baruah notes that the 'organisations and individuals that play a key role in Assamese subnational protest typically belong to the cultural realm.'

It is from its roots in Civil Society that subnational politics derives much of its and potential for generating political turmoil. The notion of a higher-order concern for the life of the nationality has the potential capacity of incorporating all Assamese irrespective of their lower-order engagements, as it were, into subnational projects.

However interesting is to analyse the socio-political implication of this projected higher-unity of the community in terms of AASU's understanding of the notion of the Assamese identity, which increasingly came to be perceived as one of consensual dominance at best and authoritarian coercion at worst by the student groups of the minority ethnic groups in the post Assam-movement years.

On Indigenous Assamese:

One observes that “like other essentialist identities, indigeneity has become a powerful tool that is being deployed by people for political mobilisation and self affirmation. Ideas of territoriality and indigeneity have been conflated in ethnic-nationalist discourses and encouraged demands for autonomy and secession, although the two ideas are distinct” (Arora, 2007:119).

It is interesting to observe the interesting articulations on the issue of indigeneity in Assam by different student groups.

Significantly AASU takes note in recent years, “the word ‘indigenous’ does not feature in the Assam accord of 1985. Its subsequent prominence in the politics of Assam creates a lot of tension and controversy” (AASU, 2006: 51).

One finds significant reference to different issues involving the parameters of Assamese identity in the speech of AASU’s adviser and long standing former adviser Sammujal Bhattacharjya’s speech to the annual session of the organization in 2005.

However, this definition of the indigenous of Assam given in the R.C. Bhageval Committee report in 1951 is taken to be the accepted and ‘settled’ definition on the matter by the AASU leadership.

“Indigenous person of Assam means a person belonging to the state of Assam and speaking the Assamese language or any tribal dialect of Assam, or in the case of Cachar the language of the region.”

Emphasizing on the need for constitutional safeguards to preserve the ‘basic identity’ of the Assamese nation, Bhattacharjya elaborates on the ‘concept’ of an Assamese, “...who is an Assamese? On this the Student’s Union have discussed with a number of anthropologist, historians of Assam. After detailed discussion the Student’s Union has put forth the definition of ‘Assamese’ for seat reservation. This definition is for the purpose of seat reservation only. Anthropologists are saying that speakers of the languages of Assam’s indigenous ethnic group’s are Assamese. Though this definition is acceptable it cannot be framed with the issue of seat reservation. Historians have said that one of the three can be taken for defining ‘Assamese’. The year of 1826, the 1947 or

the year of 1950. But keeping in perspective the situation arising out of the country's partition and the flowing process of integration between different religious, linguistic, ethnic groups-peoples, the Student's Union have taken a liberal position (perspective) and instead of 1826, 1947 or 1950, defines the concept of an 'Assamese' as the people irrespective of religion-language-ethnicity, whose names are included in the Citizenship registrar of 1951 based on the first population census of post-independence India in 1951, and their subsequent generations. By the word 'Assamese' the Student's Union refers to all the nationalities, tribes, ethnic, religious groups composing the greater Assamese nation." (ibid: 50) (translation mine).

Also it is to be noted that conscious of their earlier damaging step during the Assam movement of calling for abolition of reservations for Scheduled Castes and tribes in the state, AASU leadership now is very propmt to clarify that "the system of reservation for the Scheduled caste and Scheduled tribe people will continue as before. This definition of Assamese will be effective only for seat reservation" (Ibid: 51).

The constitutional safeguard demanded by the Student's Union to 'protect and preserve the identity and existence of the Assamese people in their own motherland from the pressure of illegal foreign migrants', are as follows:

- Special status for Assam as par Jammu and Kashmir.
- Implementation of Dual citizenship system in Assam.
- Inner-permit system for Assam.
- Creation of a higher legislative assembly composed of all the ethnic groups of the state.
- Exclusive land-rights and right to buy and sell land to the indigenous Assamese only.
- Rights over the resources of the state.
- System of regional autonomous rule.
- Job security and 100 percent job reservation for the indigenous Assamese in the central, state, Governmental-nongovernmental sectors.

To protect, preserve and uphold the language-culture and political rights of the Assamese people, hundred percent seats in the Parliament, assembly and local panchayats must be reserved for the indigenous Assamese.

On the matter of constitutional safeguards 'after incessant effort and tremendous pressure created by the Student's Union' the Central government has created a sub-committee. Presided by the joint-secretary of the central home-ministry the committee is made up of three representatives each from the state government and AASU (Ibid:52).

Significantly accepting the accusation that AASU is a high-caste organization, Prabin Boro, the then president of the AASU said in a 2005 interview,

"Every work has an atmosphere. In what atmosphere the leadership of Prafulla-Bhriгу should have welcomed the tribal-ethnic leadership to the same platform, ridiculing that atmosphere they had made fun of the ethnic leadership. As a result of which leaders like Bodufa Upen Brahma was compelled to go out of the AASU and form a separate platform for the Bodos" (Dainik Janambhumi, 11th January, 2005: 5) (Translation mine).

Interestingly, one sees a conscious effort from the AASU to dispel their image as being an 'upper caste' organization and restore what one contributor in their annual 2005 souvenir calls a 'secular ideology' (AASU, 2005: 59). This is often through the symbolic but crucial way of electing people belonging to tribal and other backward sections of the Assamese society to the highest office of AASU as president and general secretaries. However, the empowering potential of this gesture remains a topic of contestation.

The fact that AASU is getting increasingly aware of the internal tension gripping Assamese identity is evident from the fact that in their 15th annual souvenir in 2005, a total number of six articles are reflections and discussions on various dimensions of the issue of ethnic identities in Assam.

On 28th September 2004 following AASU's invitation leadership of the various ethnic-students groups sat in a joint discussion in Guwahati, working out on issues of joint importance. Following this discussion, on the 16th October 2004 the different ethnic students organization have taken out a joint rally with AASU in the streets of Guwahati and the student leaders of the ethnic groups were the special invitee of the central

‘Swahid Diwas’ (martyr’s day) observed by AASU on the 10th December at Guwahati. AASU souvenir comments, “Every ethnic group has their separate organization, with separate separate aims, ideologies and purposes. It is only natural. But the decision for a unified fight for solving the common problems of Assam is definitely a positive step in today’s situation” (AASU, 2005: 20).

Thus one sees that the All Assam Students Union (AASU), once the hegemonic students’ body of Assam, has lost much of its former glory and hold over the students of Assam. But still it has the widest organizational base and considerable clout in the state. With the rise of ethnocentric student bodies there is undoubtedly some erosion-but except for one instance there is no antagonistic relation has ever developed between AASU and other organisations, rather a tendency of working together has been visible. AASU has not opposed tribal autonomy movements. It has accepted the concept of autonomy on principle. Though its ideas of tribal autonomy into reality are different from those advocated by the tribal organisations, there appears to be a lot of flexibility on both sides. Many tribal students who have become active on their own ethnocentric organisations have remained members of AASU also. However, it is also true that AASU has been increasingly identified as an organisation mainly of Assamese speaking students. Two other factors that have contributed to the decline of AASU had been its proximity and involvement with state power during AGP rule and the rapid rise of ULFA which was able to hijack the base of AASU (Bora D.J,1995: 285).

B. Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP)

We argue that AJYCP, an active participant of the Assam movement, however represents a different axis of the nationalist student politics enūnciated by the ethnic majority Assamese speakers. The organisational orientation and outlook regarding matters of Assamese nationalism and identity sets it significantly apart from the discourse of student politics as preached and practice by AASU.

Aims and Objectives:

AJYCP is essentially a non-political nationalist Conglomerate of students and youths of the State. It considers regionalism as an apparatus through which equal and even development can be achieved. Parochialism, chauvinism are misnomers for regionalism which are gleefully used by the reactionary forces to taint and negate the usefulness of regionalism.

AJYCP was formed with the objectives of achieving Total Autonomy to Assam, Dual Citizenship for its people and Innerline Permit system for those who enter Assam. It believes, only through Total Autonomy a State can , have the right over its resources and reap the real benefit of a true Federalism. Dual Citizenship and Innerline Permit can save a small nationality from the threat of being swamped off culturally and economically.

A release from the organisation says the following about the birth of the organisation on 12th March, 1978.

“At a time when there was lack of any selfless organisation serving the interest of Assam, in that time before 1978, that space was filled in Assam by some totally obedient youth and student groups of some particular pan-Indian or so called ‘global-humanitarian’ political parties. Harboring political interest, these groups and organisations had no space whatsoever to work in the interest of Assam. For a comprehensive development of Assam the need is of apolitical, voluntary organisation devoid of political interest. Having realized this “Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba-Chatra Parishad’ composed of the youth students of Assam came to the fore in 1978” (*Istahar*, AJYCP, 1988: II.) (translation mine).

It clarifies the implication of the word ‘apolitical’ as being outside parliamentary politics.

“AJYCP is organisation made up of political ideology. The word ‘apolitical’ is outside the ambits of parliamentary politics and as such reflects the meaning of distance from direct politics. In contemporary society neglect towards talents, lack of educational facilities, social discrimination, people’s toil and pain is manifest. The Parishad feels that transformation of this social-system is not possible through the existing parliamentary politics. Therefore the need for apolitical (non-parliamentary) social change has been

felt. In contemporary situation this is the only pragmatic path”(Ibid:29) (translation mine).

On Assamese Identity:

“The one who living permanently within the geographical boundaries of Assam, embraces as own Assam’s overall, social, linguistic, economic, cultural, political and so on bindings and with the utmost sincerity taking each one of Assam’s problem as own, thinks and acts towards creating a healthy Assam, that one only is an Assamese” (Ibid:.7) (translation mine).

AJYCP puts special focus on poly-cultural aspect of the Assamese nation. It strongly emphasizes the composite nature of the Assamese nation resulting out of a particular historical amalgamation of diverse ethnic cultures. They view the nation-building process in Assam as being four-dimensional against the usual three-dimensional nation-building theory. The backdrop of unique inter-ethnic integration adding the fourth dimension to the three dimensions of place, time and entity.

“Bodo, Kachari, Karbi, Ialung, Tiwa, Koch, Rabha, Chutia, Mech, Moran etc. ethnic groups and along with Kayastha, Kaivarta, Kalita, Keut, Musalman, Gosain, Bamun, Ahom, Mahanta and so on have composed the Assamese nation. These groups of people, evolving over various events and stages of history have co-existed harmoniously within the geographical boundaries of Assam, the respective economic status and habitat of these ethnic- groups have shaped up contours of the common habitat and economic life of the Assamese nation. They only have kept the Assamese nation-building process moving” (Ibid:8) (translation mine).

On Language:

AJYCP also acknowledges ‘language as basic component of culture’. However, their agenda on Assamese language falls short of an aggressive campaign of linguistic nationalism. They seem to consider the multilingual reality of the composite Assamese culture, when they declare, “in the land of Assam, Assamese is the mass-language, the

ethnic groups of Assam have their own distinct cultures, have their languages. The mother tongues of the ethnic groups of Assam are the languages of the whole Assamese nation. The various ethnic groups in Assam too having accepted Assamese as the common language have been working for the preservation and welfare of their own languages” (ibid:22) (translation mine).

AJYCP also emphasizes the ‘rootedness’ of the different ethnic-tribal languages in Assam, as Assam being the very ground of evolution of these languages. “Whatever their language originally be, the language they speak today has grown to this form in this very Assam, this language too is Assam’s language, and the different ethnic groups speaking the language of Assam are only Assamese. The Assamese language born out of integration between the languages of the different ethnic groups in Assam and various races and ethnicities, have created a four-dimensional concept of nation building instead of a three-dimensional one, thus maximizing the ethos of Assamese nation-building.”

It is interesting to observe that the organisation does not put the issue of ‘Assamese as the mother-tongue’ as a premier for an ‘indigenous Assamese identity.’ However, at the same time it does accord the Assamese language a primary role in defining the parameters of ‘the Assamese nation’ and thus identity. But it is the particular conceptualization of the ‘Assamese’ language as essentially assimilative and co-existing with other ethnic languages, that puts their position in perspective.

Radical Nationalism and Assamese Students:

It can be argued that the radical trend of Assamese nationalism resulting in demands of ‘sovereignty’ is represented by the discourse of the outlawed insurgent group United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). An important feature is to note here is that most of the founding members of this insurgent group used to be active student members participating in the Assam movement and which subsequently left the movement with a serious critique. It is this critique of the inability of the middle-class led student movement to offer a resolution of Assam’s problem in terms of deeper systemic maladies, that have subsequently attracted a section of the student population of Assam,

outside the domain of 'institutionalised' student movements, towards a insurgent form of protest against the very institutional norms.

In this light, ULFA accuses AASU of suffering from symptoms of middle-class hypocrisy and misleading politics.

However, interestingly, time and again ULFA keeps calling AASU to be a 'national organisation' (Jatiya Sangathan) and calls for it to take 'a broad and uncompromising stand on the national question coming out of its narrow and compromising outlook on it.'

Significantly, one ULFA leader writes, "the student society needs to introspect thoroughly, why despite the existence of a largest Student's Union with a long history, separate student organisations have taken shape within the different ethnic groups in Assam. Today's student is the future of tomorrow's nation. Student politics is the breeding ground of national politics. A subjugated nation has nothing separately as student politics. There is nothing separate as student's problems. In the case, the solutions far from being student-centric alone. Student problems are ingrained in the problems of peasants, labourers and the vast numbers of the toiling masses. The first and foremost problem of a subjugated nation is- 'liberation', in which is engraved the remedies for all maladies of various the classes- groups, sections of Assam. Therefore, the unified demand for all should be- 'national liberation'. Hope the Student's Union will perceive this" (Saikia Pradan, 2006: 16-17).

The initial relationship between the AASU and ULFA has to be traced to the political void left in the political space in Assam with the disintegration of the regional forces after the high point of the AGP victory in 1985 assembly elections.

As one perceptive commentator observes, "The case of AASU was particularly tragic as it was a question of survival for it. It faced the strange dilemma of maintaining ideological distance from both AGP and ULFA. On the one hand, it realized that a scathing criticism of the AGP government was indispensable to its political survival, given that the AGP popularity was beating a retreat. On the other hand, it could neither wholeheartedly support nor castigate ULFA. To support ULFA wholeheartedly would imply an erasure of its own identity. Nor did it dare to castigate ULFA as it might

amount to an alienation from the masses. In other words, it fought hard, rather unsuccessfully, to take the wind away from ULFA's sail." (Das , 1994:43).

It turned out to be an ambiguous relationship at best. At one point in 1991, denouncing ULFA's call for a 'sovereign' Assam despite feeling that 'the chains of dependence have kept us dead', it goes on to admit that, "we do not call for finishing ULFA by Killing its activists; because they wish the Assamese people well, intend to do good to the country as well as its people and the circumstances have forced them to chart out a separate line."⁷

Significant is to observe that when People's Committee for Peace Initiative (PCPI) was formed in 2005, to foster an environment for a political dialogue between ULFA and the Government of India, it came as an initiative of the AJYCP along with a number of student organisations representing ethnic minorities, whereas AASU's absence from the whole process is conspicuous.

The Student Nationalism of the Phase and the Critique by Left:

The Marxist understanding of student movements highlights the phenomena of class-differences amongst the students for fragmenting the goals and ideologies of the movement, thus undermining its potential as a radical social movement. The left scholars criticizes the AASU led Assam Movement as propagating the essential class interest of a nascent bourgeoisie class in Assam, which realizing its limitation in terms of strength and resource to push out the big capital from the position of dominance in the state, has aspired to monopolise the residual left in the small industries, petty trade, professions and services as well. Thus Guha points out that at one stage, the AASU demanded even the abolition of all reservations in the matter of jobs and scholarships for scheduled castes and tribes (Guha, 2006: 83).

Observing the situation of student movement in Assam in the 1970s one Marxist observer writes, "Students are part of the general society of the country and not any specific group outside it. Since most of the countries in the world have class divisions in

⁷ Interview of Atul Bora, then AASU president, published on *Srimoyee* on 19 Feb, 1991, p.13.

the society into rich-poor, middle-class, working-class, peasants etc, and as the students comes out from these various social classes, within the student's society also representation of different sections of the class-society remains along with their respective world-views and ideologies. Thus, students coming from the propertied-ruling sections, despite showing a general interest in the student movements, keep a distance from it. Even in a nationalistic movement like Assam movement, representatives of this section have gone off soon, many going out of the state to study. Within the student's, the majority section comes from the middle-class section of the society, especially to the urban, colleges, schools and universities. And this section carries along all the opportunism, vacillation and weakness of the middle-class section- and this class's idealism and protesting self as well (though this idealism is not permanent as well). While talking about the class-consciousness of the students, one has to talk about the youthful natural honesty, idealism, ethics of protest and the relative uncorruptness of the student society that elevates it's above the narrow binds of class-interest; accord it a true democratic and mass-consciousness character." (Bora D, 1990: 68) (translation and emphasis mine).

However, this only weakens the ideological base of the student movements. Sincerest will and just consciousness alone cannot fill in for it. Any successful movement for social change needs a string political-ideological base, otherwise student movements cannot go beyond the stages of protest and at times resistance. Without a specific ideology the path of student movements gets limited. "Student movements are not movements devoid of ideologies, here too there is ideology, but this ideology is abstract. Even the demands are abstract. Politically they don't assume expression. Therefore, it does not become possible for development of any specific ideology within the movement. In our Assam Movement too the nationalistic demands of the students remained abstract, and so even if the movement put some student leaders in the echelons of power, it could not do anything for the development of the Assamese nation" (ibid: 73).

There is no constant clarity of objectives of the student movements. It is a Lack of objective ideology that results in hazy goals.

“The primary stated objective of the Assam movement was- the question of preserving the Assamese identity. But what is meant by this ‘national’ identity and how it is to be preserved, regarding these there is no clarity of thought on anybody’s part since then. On the one hand constitutional safeguards and on the other Assam’s independence-political sovereignty, musings on these two opposite poles can be seen. Of the latest student movements in Assam, one main stream opts for constitutional (reforming the constitution in need is constitutional still) system, and one-another stream born out of it advocates going to the foreign countries to prepare for an armed liberation struggle. Unclear ideologies and goals thus weaken significantly the potential of the student movements of attaining social goals” (ibid).

Another leftist observer sees the trend of middle-class using the disgruntled but politically docile youths and students against the labour movement and other militant democratic movements, by creating a situation of hyper-nationalism was implemented during the Assam movement.

“Indeed with the Assam movement, the heritage of Assam’s student movement got tarnished, and the compromising decisions of the Assam accord, a device to deceive the people, has engraved a great heritage” (Bora, 2001:333) (Translation mine)

Thus, from a Marxist point of view only when the abstract goal and agendas of the student movements clamouring for a new world is ‘concretised/expressed’ through the political ideologies and organisations aiming for ‘radical’ and ‘progressive’ changes, students can be real social agents of change. In other words, Student movement derives its full implication only within a larger environment of class-based social movements.

The dominant idea that ‘students should be above politics’ is a petty bourgeoisie reactionary propaganda, but the politics that students should involve in should be a progressive politics, a politics of class to bring down the class-system.

As we have noted, in the ethnically charged situation of student politics of Assam, in the post-Assam movement scenario, this critique of the left based on putative categories like class with assumptions of universalist modernisation theories, failed to revive the once substantial base of the left student groups in the state, in the changed political scenario.

Also one has to accept to an extent the complain, as Hussain writes, “ A cautious student of social movement would not fail to situate the nexus between the leadership of the Assam movement and its counter movement in eroding the support base of the left forces in Assam, through the systemic sharpening of primordial loyalties” (Hussain, 1993:132).

Section two

Understanding the Student Politics of Ethnic Minorities:

It is often pointed out that with Assam movement as their reference point, the tribals and ethnic minorities have become very restive against their oppressed status in a high-caste dominated regional society, building up mass movements as protest. Hussain comments that the emerging leadership of the Autochthon tribals is not prepared like other oppressed groups in Assam (the Adivasis and immigrant Muslims), to accept the hegemony of the ethnic Assamese ruling class.

“It would be important to mention here that the oppressed groups like the Na-Asamiya Muslims and the black tribals⁸ in order to survive are prepared to give up their earlier nationality status. They have shown this very clearly. For them survival is the major question and not language or nationality. Their unrest in Assam fundamentally represents the problem of adjustment between a nationality and a national minority, sharing a common homeland in an economically depressed region. The Assam Movement has shown how the ruling classes, both at the state level and the national level determines the nature of the contemporary social movements led by a middle-class leadership. The Assam Movement, in spite of its massive mobilisation, finds it near impossible to reach its apparent goal because its middle-class leadership is trapped between the two ruling classes. The leaders have reached their goals-the seat of power; but not the masses” (Hussain, 1993: 226).

⁸ . The tea-tribes.

However, the protest politics of the minority ethnic and tribal groups in the state has to be understood in some developments spanning over a period preceding the course of the Assam Movement also, though the movement undeniably gave these tendencies a concrete push.

While placing the discourse in the general backdrop of the democratizing impact of the modern times, one can highlight an argument about the two contextual reasons or situational exigencies encouraging a politics hinged on differentiation and autonomy amongst the minority student groups.

One, political developments leading to creation of a number of new states, controlled by tribal groups that were all once part of Assam has made the idea of political separation from Assam both attractive and seemingly viable to the residual tribal and minority groups in Assam (Datta P.S, 1993:10).

Two, also it is argued that “the cultural, economic and political transformation of Assam that begun in the colonial period has made mobility into the Assamese formation seem unattractive and pointless. To the ‘tribal’ peoples of the northeast the Christian missions, with their association with the ‘modern’ West, became a powerful rival to the Assamese Vaishnavite institution of *Xotro*, which under the colonial dispensation had lost its old prestige and political patronage.” (Baruah S, 1999:184).

While one needs to critically question here the real assimilative potentials of the *Xotro* institutions given the extent of crystallisation of Caste- consciousness, (Gohain, 2001: 9) the salience of religious identity - ideologies over the nature of the ‘politics of difference’ have been prominent as we will see in the case of the differences in the political styles of the Bodo and Mishing student organisations.

Apart from these specific contexts, we can underline these general issues that as Phukan (Phukan, 2003:27) points out have been driving the non-Aryan ethnic student organizations,

1. Maintenance of distinct ethnic identity.
2. Participation in the political and administrative affairs of the state.
3. appointment in government jobs and

4. Availability of adequate scope for education.

Bringing in a relative deprivation framework, Phukan writes, “The non-Aryan ethnic groups increasingly feel that they remain much more backward than the other section of the population of the state. They had not only been experiencing the problem of land alienation, unemployment, economic and political oppression under the existing socio-economic system but also discrimination in achieving their ‘rightful’ share in the society. In an underdeveloped country like ours economic development is accompanied by increased inequalities, because rewards are allocated on the basis of the strength and persistence of the organized sector of society. Therefore, it appeared to the ethnic elite, that unless they are organized on a sound footing no body would care for their development. Thus the ethnic communities began to organize their respective groups in order to develop their language and cultural heritage which they considered to be their identity symbol” (Phukan, 2007:108).

However, Phukan too puts the students groups in the category of inert subjectivity as he says, “Normally, the youth organization represents the interest of the emerging nascent ethnic middle-class. In other words, the middle-class utilises the youth and student power as a potential political resource in the game of power politics, i.e. in demanding a greater share of political power for material benefits” (ibid: 112).

Phukan blames the uneven economic development, both inter-region and intra-region, for complicating the ethno-cultural issues and thus making the student bodies vulnerable to an instrumentalist power politics in a class-society.

The Historical Trajectory:

One perceptive observer writes, “The history of ethnic resurgence and socio-political identity assertion is yet to complete a hundred years. The Bodo Students Union formed by Kalicharan Brahma in 1915 was the first reverberation. The Tribal League established in 1933 was the concrete expression of the ethnic renaissance and a loud clear sign of the arrival of modern ethnic identity consciousness of Assam tribes. The nascent tribal middle-class had in front of them the attitudes of the caste-Hindu ‘mainstream’

Assamese middle-class as example. There existed no difference in the nature of opportunism in both the section of middle-class leadership. Before independence, both sections of leadership preferred a posture of cooperation rather than confrontation with colonial regime and capital. Post-independence, the Indian ruling classes and owners of the state- capital have secured their allegiance” (Bora, 2007: 82).

In retrospect the period 1929-47 can be said to be a crucial period of transformation for the smaller ethnic-tribal groups of Assam. Some of the tribal groups presented their case to the Simon Commission visiting India in 1929. Here it is interesting to note the note of lament even in the much later years by tribal groups like ‘All Assam Mottock Yuba Chatra Sanmilan’, when they point out that it was only the ‘relatively modern educated tribes having graduates’ who could give witness to the Commission and thus subsequently got included in the tribal schedule by the government. Groups like Mottock and Moran were too ‘backward’ to avail of any opportunity arising with modern, rational-legal structures (Souvenir of 26th biennial session of ‘All Assam Mottock Yuba Chatra Sanmilan’, 2007: 16).

Indeed this reflects a significant and wider trend in the history of ethnic upsurge in Assam. We can observe a hierarchy of development within the ‘marginalised’ and ‘backward’ ethnic groups in Assam too which is proportionate to the rise of the educated ethnic elites for the respective groups.

One can observe two significant historical phase in the rise of tribal consciousness in Assam, both landmarks in the discourse of Assamese identity formation.

Deuri (Deuri Indibor, 2001: 286) points out to the significant example of the birth of ‘the Ahom Sabha’ way back in 1893 (a contemporary of ‘the Assam Association’) and along with it the process of identity consciousness of the backward sections. However what held crucial significance for the years to come was the distinction raised by the Ahom Sabha between ‘*Swajati*’ (one’s own nationality, i.e the Assamese) and ‘*Swagyati*’ (one’s own community, i.e., the Ahom). The Sabha was committed to serve the dual interest of the wider Assamese nationality as well as the own ethnic-community interest’s, though very consciously the interest of the ‘*Swajati*’ was kept above that of ‘*Swagyati*’ in the early spirit of the Sabha (Gohainbaruah Padmanath, 1987: 48.) This duality of interests

and the contradictions springing from it can be said to be the key issue influencing the leadership of the various organisation to be coming up within the different backward sections, tribals of the state in the following years.

The first decades of the 20th century saw a significant consolidation of the various tribals and other backward sections of the society towards forming identity based organisations centered on group-based demands. The slowly rising nascent middle-class within these communities, backed by the traditional elite sections of the respective communities (though significantly lesser in number and influence if compared to the Caste Assamese sections), provided the solid backbone for these organisations. Thus 'Koch Rajbangshi Khatriya Sanmelan' (1912), 'Bodo Kachari Maha Sanmelan' (1923), 'Assam Chutia Sanmelan' (1925) and by 1933 a unified organisation called 'the Tribal League' was established. Against the hegemonistic role of the caste –Hindu middle-class Assamese, Tribal League leader Bhimbar Deuri demanded in the floor of Assam Assembly- "the right of every community to have a share in administration,-a right of every community to serve the province, or to serve the people at large" (Assam Gazette, part VI B, 1939: 134).

Indibor Deuri argues that though these organisations wanted to contain the contradictions between the two interests by putting the ethnic interests as being complimentary to the cause of the greater Assamese national interest. But the overwhelming influence on the 'construction' of the Assamese 'national interest' being the interest of caste-Hindu dominant Assamese middle-class interest, there was no scope of this contradiction getting abated (Deuri I, 2001: 286).

However, with the cabinet mission proposal of grouping Assam in group C along with the Muslim dominant Bengal changed the internal dynamics of Assam politics. In the wider interest of the state, various tribal organisations under the Tribal League actively participated in the anti-grouping agitation led by the Assam provincial Congress against its All India parent party. Also the threat to tribal land-holding from Muslim settlers in the case of any merger can be said to be an important factor motivating the League. In the changed situation many a tribal leader joined the Congress getting assurance of the protection of tribal rights.

Thus rendering the different ethnic organisations almost ineffective over time.

Thus till the end half of the 1960s one observes a lull in the activities of the tribal groups in the state, as the period was marked by post-independence expectations and a gradual disenchantment. With the betrayal of the post-independence Congress government, unmitigated loss of land and consolidation of ethnic-middle-class groups, tribal organisations re-consolidates around the later half of the 1960s and reaches a new height with formation of the PTCA in the 1967.

It is interesting to observe that learning its lesson from history, unlike in the anti-grouping agitation, the ethnic-tribal organisations despite showing principled solidarity with the principle issues of the Assam movement of the late Seventies, by stepping down the movements for ethnic-rights in some cases or by showing 'moral' support in some other, in no way the tribal leadership got merged with or absorbed into the AASU or 'Sangram Parishad' leadership. Unlike previous times they were conscious about maintaining their independent functioning, because it took them almost twenty years to regroup themselves and agitate about self-rights (Deuri, 2001:287).

PTCA declared in its 1983, 18th March press declaration:

"As a result of the foreign national movement Assam is loosing the great composite character made up of various ethnic nationalities. As a result, due to the fear of each ethnic or linguistic group of being swamped by the other, the clash of interest and intolerance between different ethnic groups will increase in the future Assam. As a consequence frequent violence-counter-violence will erupt in the state. That is why the Plains Tribe Council is of the view that some pragmatic way has to be found through the rules and regulations of the Indian constitution, which will control the situation from slipping into the abyss of destruction and will restore the healthy integration between the various nationality groups. Therefore, so that through a political redrawing all linguistic-cultural communities feel secured and can spend their time and energy in their respective economic welfare, Plains Tribal Council calls on the Central Government to initiate activities towards that process soon" (Datta P.S., 1993:55) (Trans. mine).

Two Prominent Student Organisation of the Ethnic Minorities

A. All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU): 'Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty'.

The popular slogan by ABSU, 'divide Assam fifty-fifty', captures the radical and expansionist counter-streak of the Bodo student politics.

Preamble:

"We, All Bodo Students unanimously and with our purest hearts have resolved to organize the students of various Bodo groups into an organisation for better mutual understanding among ourselves, to safeguard and develop the socio-economy, culture, civilization, tradition, language and literature of the great Bodo Nationality and this organisation is known as the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) and on the expediency of having a written guiding rules of the Organisation do hereby adopt, enact and give to ourselves this constitution on this day of 2nd March 1969."

Aims and Objectives:

The main aims and objectives of the ABSU shall be to promote the Language, Literature and Culture of the Bodos. The Union shall try to achieve better mutual understanding among the Bodo Students and Public of different parts of India and abroad. The Union shall make efforts particularly to find out ways and means to:

- a) Propagate among the masses the need of imparting education through the mother tongue.
- b) To improve the Bodo language through Magazines and other literary works
- c) Develop and safeguard the culture of Bodos by bringing reforms to it through various perspectives.

- d) Develop the Bodo race economically by taking economic programmes from time to time
- e) Settle the issue relating to the political crisis that may arise among the Plains Tribal Bodo people out of the selfish and political diplomacy of the so called politicians threatening the national existence of their future generation though the ABSU is a non political socio-economic, literary and cultural organisation.
- f) Struggle to achieve the just and Constitutional rights through democratic process.
- g) Fight for all around security and if the above goals are denied and ignored, the Union further shall not refrain even from struggling for political self-determination within the framework of the Indian Constitution.
- h) Support the principle of Socialism for economic emancipation.
- i) Raise voice for the Human Rights and Civil Liberties and to develop socio-cultural relations among the various groups of Bodo Nationality living around the world.
- j) Struggle for the survival and all round prosperity of the Bodos to the extent of advanced nationalities of the world.

Question of Ethnic Identity

- The Bodo people have been systematically Assamised and a great number of them have been returned in the census of Assam as the non-Bodo speakers. Many of them have lost their link with their own language and culture, and instead have identified themselves as non-tribal and non-Bodos, and have adapted themselves to Assamese language and culture. The ethnic identity of the Bodos has, therefore, been very much jeopardized. The Bodo people have now become more and more conscious of their ethnic identity which they strive to protect at any cost.
- The Assamese neighbours content that there is a composite society incorporating all the tribes of Assam. We disagree with this assumption and presumption. The

Assamese society consists of elements which have been Aryanised in their totality. The most vital point of disagreement between the Assamese society and tribal societies is that theirs is a caste conscious society where as the tribal societies are devoid of casteism, nor do they (tribals) consider themselves as the low caste people of the so-called composite Assamese society.

Emergence of Student and Other Contemporary Organisations:

For redressal of the above grievances of the plains tribals and to help promote their all round development, a number of organisations were formed by various tribal communities. In early days the feeling deprivation among the plains tribals lead to the formation of All Assam Plains Tribal League consisting of Kachari Sanmilan, Muttock Sanmilan, Rajbanshi Sanmilan etc., working independently without any co-ordination among themselves. These organisations for their for their political safeguards and social-economic justice threatened by the high-handedness of the high-caste middle-class and the immigrants of East Bengal pleaded before the Simon Commission (1928-29) for separate electorate for the plains tribals, to provide compulsory free education, special scholarship for higher education of the tribals and not to transfer the district of Goalpara from Assam to West Bengal as contemplated by the British administration. They also pleaded for the introduction of the Innerline system to check the unrestricted flow of the immigrants from the East Bengal to the tribal areas of Assam. The above tribal organisations integrated themselves into Tribal League on 17th April 1933. The Tribal League immediately after its formation submitted a memorandum to the Constituent Assembly pleading for the creating of the scheduled areas for the plains tribals under the fifth schedule of the constitution.

All Bodo Student Union and Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA)

As we have seen it was the All Bodo Students' Union, although a non-political organisation that took a major role in Bodo politics since its inception on 15th February, 1967. In fact, it was the ABSU who was instrumental in the formation of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam on 27th February 1967, just twelve days after the formal launching of the ABSU. The declared aims and objects of the Plains Tribal Council of

Assam was to secure autonomy for the plains tribals in the form of union territory under the name Udayachal and the ABSU members were the main force behind it and participated in the programmes of PTCA. The ABSU took part in the formation of the PTCA in the wake of the Government of India Plan for Reorganization of Assam which was announced by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 13th January, 1967. The PTCA working in close co-operation with the ABSU for the first time placed the demand for the creation of the separate state for the plains tribals on 19th May 1968. Since the question of autonomy for the plains tribes of Assam remained a major issue in Assam politics, and the ABSU kept themselves associated with this issue all throughout.

B. All Assam Mising Student's Union (TMPK):

Preamble:

“We, the All Mising students unanimously and with our purest hearts have resolved to organize the Mising students into an organisation for and better and mutual understanding among ourselves to safeguard and develop the socio-economic, culture, civilization, tradition, language, literature and political rights of Mising Nationality and this organisation known as the Takam Mising Porin Kcbang and on the expediency of having a written guiding rules of the organisation, do hereby adopt, enact and give to ourselves this Constitution on this day of 30th October 1972.”

Aims and Objectives:

The aims and objectives of the TMPK shall be based on the upliftment of the Mising Nationality in respect of cultural, language and literature, social and political justice. The Kcbang shall try to achieve better mutual understanding among Mising youths an dpublic of different parts of India. The Union shall make efforts particularly to find out ways and means to-

- 1) struggle to achieve the just and constitutional rights through democratic process.

- 2) to settle the issue relating to political crisis that may arise among the Mising people.
- 3) Propagate among the masses the need of imparting education through the mother tongue.
- 4) Improve the Mising language through magazines and other literary works.
- 5) Develop and safeguard the cultures of the Misings by bringing reforms to it through various perspectives.
- 6) Develop the Mising race economically by taking economic programmes from time to time.
- 7) Fight for all around security and if the above goals are denied and ignored, the Union further shall not refrain even from struggling for political self-determination.
- 8) Support the principle of Socialism for economic emancipation.
- 9) Raise voice for the Human Rights and Civil Liberties and to develop socio-cultural relations among the various groups of Mising Nationality of the country.
- 10) Struggle for the survival and all round prosperity of the Misings to the extent of advanced nationalities of the country.

One finds repeated mention of the need to stage an aesthetic rebel against cultural subordination in the inaugural speech delivered on the occasion of All Mishing Student's Union (TMPK)'s annual session at Sadia, on 2006. Drawing reference to the 'Black movement' the speaker said, "against the 'white aesthetics' the 'Blacks movement' came out with 'black aesthetics, with the central motto "black is beautiful". This issue of the 'Blacks' movement have taught us that any movement aimed at any nationalities rights and liberation should have the capacity to assume the form of a cultural movement....in our context we need to seriously speculate whether as a solid principal we can adopt the position of " Mongoloid aesthetics as against Aryan Aesthetics" (Pegu, 2007: 99).

It further places this thesis in a historical trajectory thus,

“Aggressive cultural invasion of the Aryan culture and sensibilities since the pre-historic time to the entity of Assam, have put the cultures of different Mongoloid ethnic groups like Sonowal Kachari, Chutia, Ahom, Moran-Motok, Koch etc. at near extinction. But despite this powerful Aryan-aesthetic invasion, the Mongoloid aesthetic values in terms of norms and rituals, customs, physical built and so on survived as the footnotes of time. So in contexts like this, it is not possible to carry struggle positively forward on a permanent basis, by putting the socio-economic aspects in the front. Integral and inherent to it is the demand of preserving the autonomy of the ethnic cultures of the different nationalities of the North-east. Preservation of the socio-economic self-sufficiency is a demand that is a corollary. The issue of economic oppression is involved here, but it a relative subject matter. Because, no nationality have a permanent economic status or it is not a constant truth. But, the nationality’s ethnic- cultural aesthetics have continuity and becomes the permanent truth provided it does not get dissolved into the cultural stream of another aggressive culture. The continuing clash between Aryan and Mongoloid cultural world-views right from the pre-historic days, has come to be manifested today through the cultural preservation demanding movements of the Mongoloid ethnic group’s of the Northeast India. However it is surprising that the myriad differences of these groups various external demands have kept these groups separate till date blocking the possibility of unified fighting front based on a Mongoloid cultural aesthetic of resistance” (ibid:101-102).

On Tribal Unity in Assam:

TMPK notes the fact that the various tribal movements in Assam demanding self-rule have taken to different political-ideological routes and channels due to which social or political unity of Assam tribals have not come about. Interestingly, The TMPK considers the political style and discourse of the Mishings for political autonomy to be different from the nature of the Bodo’s agitation for the same. “Within the tribals, Mishing national struggle is uniform in character with the trends in autonomous council movements of the Rabha, Tiwa, Deuri and Sonowal Kacharis. Therefore, after attainment of autonomous councils, for all round development of the tribal life-styles one must have

a unified political programme of all the tribal groups in the state. One needs to mobilize political will to secure rights in a democracy. Due to separate ethnic locations, tribals in Assam are always in a minority in their respective locations. But a unified programme based on inter-ethnic coordination will give them a strong base for mobilisation” (Doley, 2006: 20).

The movement for ‘Udayachal’ under the Banner of PTCA has added a new dimension to the tribal politics of the state. significant is to note that the forming of the PTCA and the subsequent politics surrounding it is considered by the TMPK as inimical to the development off tribal solidarity in the state, very much contrary to the take of ABSU, as we have discussed.

“Parallel to the unified struggle of the tribal groups from the platform of the PTCA, a process of ethnic-group consciousness and birth of many ethnic organisations took place. This kind of exclusive, ethno-centric activities by different tribal groups have rendered PTCA ineffective and finally almost insignificant towards the end years of the Eighties decade” (Doley, 2007: 98).

TMPK blames PTCA’s tendency of ‘anthropological differentiation’ amongst the Assam tribes, for its own eventual downfall. The memorandum submitted by PTCA leadership To the President of India on 1967, 20th May reflects this perspective which TMPK alleges strongly influenced inter-ethnic differences in Assam and led to heightened sensitivity towards group-particularity amongst the tribal groups in the state.

“Para 3.1 mentioned- the plain tribes can broadly be divided into two groups- (a) the Bodo. (b) The Miri or the Miching” (Ibid: 101) .

Inclusion in the Bodo groups of many a small tribes like Rabha, Lalung, Deuri etc have suddenly made these groups aware of the need to preserve their own distinct ethnic-tribal identity.

Whereas, to tribal groups like Mishings, it provided with the impetus to organise and later on lead an alternate style of tribal politics to that of the Bodos, in the state.

On Assam's Multiethnicity:

Analysing the nature of the society in Assam, Dr. Birinchi Kumar Baruah comments, "because Assam is a border region and its relation are mostly with Kirata or Mongoloid people, the Aryanised social form and Vedic customs and rites do not adhere to any rigid pattern. For the same reasons, the number of Brahmins here is small and its influence not dominant and further racial discrimination or the caste system is not rigid"(Baruah, 1951: 200).

Pegu, however raises the point that though less in number and never in a perceived dominant position, the Brahmins of the Aryan stock have been occupying a significant position of domination in the intellectual life-world of the land from pre-historic times, and hence immensely influencing the process of Assamese nationality formation.

"There is no instance of the Aryan Brahmins favouring giving up even a fraction of their own identity, they being encouraging (the tribals) to give up their national being to merge in the process of the Assamese nationality formation. We need to get clear-whether it is favourable with us or not to give up our own tribal-selves to participate in the process of creating the Assamese national self" (Pegu, 2007:10-11.)

Pegu also points out to the communal mindset of the Assam state machinery as responsible for damaging a healthy nationality formation process in Assam. He points out to a very significant example of a particular debate in the state assembly in the early years of post-independence phase. When in the 1950, 13 flood affected Miri (old name for Miching) tribal families were resettled in an area of the Tezpur district, they were soon evicted by the local administration on the ground of its close proximity to 'Assamese' villages. When the matter up was brought up in the assembly in 1953 by a Miching MLA Malchandra Pegu, the Caste Hindu local MLA of the area, B.C. Bhagavati 'opined' that, "it is not desirable to settle the Miris so close to the non-Miri Assamese villages" (Pegu K, 2007:14.). Further debate as sought by Pegu was scuttled in the assembly. This incident is one clear example of communalism and castiest chauvinism getting well entrenched in the higher echelons of the states governing apparatus even in the early years of formation. Further, tendencies like these irreparably

damaged the prospects of a healthy Assamese nationality formation, in its crucial early stage.

Against the totalizing and coercing understanding of the word Assamese, TMPK offers four dimensional understanding of the word 'Assamese', territorial, linguistic, social and ethnic (Doley B.K, 2006:7), which calls for the following measures,

1. Assam Sahitya Sabha should be renamed as Assamese Sahitya Sabha.
2. Different ethnic groups will democratically delegate members from their respective literary bodies to establish a joint literary body which only will be called 'Assam Sahitya Sabha'. Assam Sahitya Sabha will have elect representation from the Assamese Sahitya Sabha as well.
3. Assam Sahitya Sabha will take initiative to form literary bodies within the ethnic groups which are not yet formed.
4. Assam Sahitya Sabha will also take necessary measures to get official recognition for the languages of all the ethnic groups in the state.

In a significant development, on 1st October, 2005, 'the Sanimilita Sahitya Sabha Manch, Asom' (United Literary Bodies, Assam), have forwarded a proposition to the Government of Assam (Home and political department) asking for the word 'Assamese' mentioned in the Sixth Schedule of the Assam Accord to be replaced by the phrase 'indigenous people of Assam'. Welcoming this gesture as a positive sign for Assam, however, TMPK expresses about its reservation about this step putting a definite end to the linguistic chauvinism of the Assamese.

Is Ethnic Student Politics Shifting the Discourse on Assamese Identity?

The successful demand by the Bodos to include their language in the Eighth Schedule is an interesting story how the language was pushed to different levels of education with mass movements with a parallel process of standardization of the language. The other plain and hill tribes within Assam have also started pushing their languages at different levels of education along with the demand for more autonomy. This new trend gives a

new paradigm to the language movement and the question of identity in the state. The question of Assamese identity also had undergone process of transformation consequently.

The issue surfaced sharply regarding the implementation of the Assam accord. According to clause no 6 of the Accord,

“Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people” (The Assam Accord, 1985: 6).

Strong remonstrations came from the various communities of the state whose mother tongue is not Assamese. It was contested that as the various ethnic groups like Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa etc. have their own distinct identity, with distinctive language, culture, heritage and historical background, the word ‘Assamese’ used in the clause no 6 of the Assam Accord is too ambiguous to include the various communities and can be jeopardizing to various ethnic identities. A committee was formed to review the definition of Assamese by the government of Assam under the aegis of Additional Chief Secretary (Home and Political Affairs), in the year 2005. Various meetings were held in the Assam Secretariat between delegates from the literary bodies representing different communities in Assam including Assam Sahitya Sabha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, Tiwa Mathanlai Tokhra, Karbi Lamet Anei, Mising Agom Ke’bang, Deuri Sahitya Sabha, Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha, Hmar Sahitya Sabha, Nikhil Rabha Sahitya Sabha and Char Chapori Sahitya Parishad.

It is interesting to observe here that though it were the student bodies representing different communities that crystallized and mobilised the strength on the language issue, the state choose to negotiate with the more middle-class literary bodies, less confrontational or perhaps lesser representative.

According to All Assam Students Union (AASU), solutions can be of two types:

Ethnic- anthropological and pragmatic –workable.

From the anthropological point of view it should be “Persons speaking the indigenous languages of Assam”. From the later point of view AASU decided on the definition:

“Persons enlisted in NRC (National Register of Citizens) 1951 and their descendants are Assamese”.

After deliberations between different ethnic bodies it was decided unanimously that the word “Assamese” should be replaced by the phrase “indigenous people of Assam”. The resolution of 6th September, 2005 for the effort to be undertaken to define ‘Assamese’ was also formally withdrawn. The word indigenous was explained as such:

“people who are living since the historical period in this geographical area and who had become assimilated with the soil, water, air, people and the aboriginal culture of Assam and who are already accepted by the greater society of Assam are the indigenous people of Assam.”

Thus a unified effort to define “Assamese” had to be dropped and it was decided that the beneficiaries of the provision in clause no.6 must be determined not by the language but by the ‘indigenouness’ of the people. Thus the lingua franca Assamese as a referring point for the identification of a nationality came to be questioned and it got replaced by the term ‘indigenous’ as the new anchor of identity.

Summing Up:

One can see that the student movement in Assam has reached a historical juncture where it is poised between a poetics of protest as against a prose of state-building. Whereas there has been a gradual move towards ethnisisation and a language of group rights, at the same time the rights they are seeking to claim are getting blunted by institutional manipulation of state-building by the dominant majority.

Indeed one can argue that the rise of the students led social movement in the forms of ethno-centric student movements in Assam undercuts the discourse of democratic politics and a putative universalisation that conceptualizes the transfusion of the centre and the margins.

The three evolutionary phases of student politics in the state thus embodies two primary conceptualisations by the students as social agents,

(a) The place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated. (Hall, 1995: 201).

(b) The need to consolidate a group position emphasizing an interpenetration of culture and politics for perpetuating boundaries between the self and the other, contextually and strategically, for 'symbolic-political-material ends.' (Barth, 1969:35).

Undergoing the evolution, the student movements of Assam today as we have seen, have been fragmented along ethnic lines, each representing particular ethnic groups or groupings and their aspirations. Different ethnic tribal student organisations have risen and have started to organize themselves socially and politically and most of them have become the main rallying force of the different autonomy movements.

The rise of ethnocentric student movements have greatly eclipsed the once powerful, wide based, secular, left and democratic student organisations in Assam. These organisations still exist but have become marginalised in the socio-political arena of the state.

The failure of the left parties and student organisations to comprehend and take initiative in the ethnic movements on the one hand and rapid change of the ground level situation and the failure to cope with it on the other is widely responsible for it.

As we have seen, the ethnocentric student organisations have consciously embarked upon a path of ethnic revivalism. The fragmentation of the broad base, secular and democratic student movement in the state into various ethnocentric and revivalist organisations has resulted in lot of tension. Such fragmentation is actively abetted by the ruling forces who feel threatened by united students' movements. They can also more easily manipulate the fragmented organisations with promises, rewards and threats. In this situation many such ethnocentric organisations, sapped of strength of fragmentation, have become easy prey and tools of vested interests. This has created lots of social tension all around. This alarming situation is further compounded by the fact that the state, which has aided and patronized with money such organisations at various points of time or its own interest, has failed to evolve a clear policy on tribal question and autonomy issue. Thereby, it has created a situation where there is real danger of the sense

of alienation among the different communities increasingly laying the ground for future insurgencies.

However, at the same time, we can also look into the positive side of the phenomena as bringing the marginalised to the centrestage. Also one cannot overlook the politics of solidarity at play here, based on an emancipatory notion of 'difference' as a radical extension of 'plurality'. Thus the platforms like PTCA, PCPI as we discussed were formed as a critique of a putative universalisation overlooked at times by the dominant nationalism practiced by student groups like AASU.

Apart from that it is significant to note here is increased co-ordination between different student bodies on the question of foreigners and outsiders, thus indicating some level of external consensus still prevailing in the state, whereas as we saw, the earlier perceived normative consensus of the community got its biggest critique from these very same tribal student organisations. The factors resulting in a binding critique of these movements, otherwise separated, has to be understood as generated by,

- Insensitive state reaction to various autonomy demands or demands of internal self-determination.
- Continuing alienation of land-holdings due to incessant migration into the state; that has impacted different groups of people in the state.
- Failure to gain a minimum of control over the natural resources that continues to foster the process of alienation that spreads across different groups.

A broad based unity among the student bodies of Assam has the potential of becoming a potent force for progress and democracy. But there also exists the equal danger of it becoming a force of reaction. It is necessary to keep a close watch on the evolving situation of volatile student politics of Assam and the timely need of intervention by intellectuals, social scientists, social leaders through various forums from time to time. The importance of continuous and living interaction cannot be over stressed.

CONCLUSION

THE CHANGING TRENDS OF STUDENT POLITICS IN ASSAM: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS

The research periodises the evolution of the student movements in Assam into three primary phases on the basis of the manifestation of a particular ideology as a dominant one over the others in a particular period, shaping the major thrust of student politics. Each phase evolved into another and shifted the dominant locus standi of the student movements of the day. However, the three phases cannot be viewed as absolute. A detailed look of the scenario of student politics during these phases illuminates an overlapping of all the three. In any one of the phases one encounters the presence of all the three major characteristics in various degrees, i.e., a majoritarian civic nationalism, left-liberal universalism and group specific ethno-nationalism. Thus, the history of these movements is in no way a uni-linear and one-sided one, rather these set of factors constantly define-redefine the spheres of each other. Also while the characteristics of a social movement are present in the student movements of Assam, they are of polyglottal in nature, assuming ambiguous yet legal means (Deka, 1998: 110), for assuming an interpenetration of politics and culture (Cohen A, 1993) to achieve 'symbolic-political-material ends (Barth, 1969: 35). However as we have seen, recognition of student movements as social movements, at a particular period of history, does not minimize or eliminate their identity or their historical or social importance. We can also safely confer that the students' movements have undergone a qualitative shift as they got transmuted from universal to particular.

In this concluding chapter, we take stock of our major research findings and explore some possibilities for the further research inquiries.

Basic Characteristics of Student Politics in Assam:

Viewing Student Politics as A Process:

In conclusion, one can summarise that the student movements in Assam can be viewed more aptly as a process and not a mere product per se. These movements are 'diachronic' in nature being the product of historical circumstances and denoting a sequence of events or process in time. These movements seem to animate in the interactions- contradictions inherent in the exchange between the basic and proximate factors functional in any social movement. As we have discussed in the initial section of our research, basic factors are those features of social structure that hold potentialities of discontent and dissatisfaction inherent in them. Proximate factors, on the other hand, are intervening factors which convert these potentialities into consciousness and action. Thus the structural mooring of a social movement comes to the fore when the proximate factors operate upon the basic factors present in the structure. However, viewed in the context of Assam, one observes that the interaction between the basic and proximate factors of the student movements have been of a dialectical nature, involved in a process of constant shifts and movements. Issues like price rise, medium of instruction, inclusion of foreign nationals in the voters' list etc. have been the prominent 'proximate' factors accentuating the 'basic' factors of the structural realities of Assam like growing ethnisation, mal-governance, and defective federal set-up and so on.

We can now sum up that the student politics in Assam, following a historical evolution has become a sphere where the ethnically divided youth try to voice the rights claims specific to the groups and communities they belong to and represent. We have argued that Ethnic communities dominate the agenda of rights in Assam (also the North-East) to the point of making the rights claims reflect the inter-community divisions and conflicts.

Viewed in this light, the agendas of the rights put across and harbored by various students' organizations operating in the state look almost alike and contain a few of common features:

One, the different student groups have become the socially legitimate and influential right-bearing body for the different communities in Assam, as the most effective actors in the cultural realm of nationality politics, instrumental to the project of hegemony.

Two, the rights they claim are exclusive to the community they represent. Sometimes, the claims are so mutually exclusive that they threaten to tear the political fabric apart.

Three, the rights are claimed on the ground that they reflect the 'normative consensus' of the community. On the one hand, while making the rights claims the youth leaders project their community as an 'end to itself regardless to its status as a means to any other end' (Parsons, 1949).

The community not only informs the agenda of the right but makes the agenda apparent and self-evident to the point of making it non-negotiable. The agenda is coupled as it were with an injunction that 'future actions conform to this course'. Since the rights appear as non-negotiable, it is always for the ethnic other to decide what they are going to do and how they want to interact with them.

The Dominant Languages of Rights:

As we have seen in our study, the most meaningful understanding of the language of rights as one of protest, adopted by the various student groups in Assam, can be understood in terms of their non-representation with regards to rights and ethnic, national and cultural identities.^(Biswas and Bhattacharjee, 2001: 110-115). While claims to rights such as right to employment, education and livelihood, constitute civil and political rights, thereby signifying a broad democratic configuration of forces beyond cultural affiliations, non-representation in any aspect of such civil and political right requires an extra dimension of a politics of affiliation. One could clearly demarcate takes on the notion of Rights and its associated claims in two distinct camps of contemporary student movements (Bhattacharjee S. P, 2007: 52).

For example, the left liberal ideologies speak the language of universal Rights and uphold the claims of those who are denied of these Rights. Left Liberal policies calls for struggles against hegemony and dominance that requires a broad based democratic mobilization.

The other camp propagates the idea of group Rights against Universal Rights and champions the cause of ethnic and cultural formation in a context of contest between groups over rights which are universal.

The distinction between the camps enables us to place various youth organizations within a framework of political and ideological struggle.

One could distinguish the punch lines of the two styles of interpretation of complex ethnic movement in the context of North-East India in general and Assam in particular. While the left liberals celebrated a unified concept of nation without any space for difference of sub-national identities, the ethnic organizations pursued the idea of difference between Nation and Nationality.

Interesting here also is to observe that this attitude of denial of any articulating space for sub-national identities have been a feature of the dominant non-left, civic-nationalist student movements of the state as well. The status of sub-national being a relative one, as the AASU vows to garner a growing space for the sub-national Assamese identity within a Indian identity, the different minority ethnic groups in the state challenges the hegemonic Assamese identity to enlarge their own sub-national space.

As we discussed this foregoing chapter, this trend of the implosion of the group rights resulted into an assertion of community rights through a politics of articulation and situational exigencies. One common thread that ran through all these assertions was the claim of homeland and territorial autonomy to be achieved within the apparatus of the State through some form of Reservation or the other.

New Trends in Student Politics: Challenges to the Modernist Ontology?

What has emerged from our study is a concept of ethnic nationalism that is conceptualized on the basis of cultural difference and ethnic singularity and most importantly which valorises difference as much as equality. This notion therefore acts as a radical extension of pluralism. This politics of identity, enunciated by the ethnic-minority student organisations is the latest phase of student movements in Assam and as we have discussed in previous chapters, it has led to an overall shift of emphasis of the

scenario of student politics in Assam. This needs to be perceived as actions of people who were hitherto marginalised from dominant political discourses and 'mainstream' social movements. These new theories of 'identity politics' have shifted explanations for actions from 'interests', 'norms' to 'identities', 'solidarities', from the notion of the universal and essentialist social agents to particularistic categories of concrete persons. Thus these new ways of identity assertion by some student groups challenges the putative universalisation and modernist ontological core of some of the dominant student groups in the state like the AASU having its primary base within the students coming from the majority ethnic group in the state, the Assamese speakers (Dev R, 1996: 117).

The study argues that this is a politics of difference that is being articulated by the ethnic 'other', an identity assertion by the ethnic groups that had celebrated the politics of multiculturalism previously. Thus increasing identity articulation based on difference by the communities like the Bodos, Rabhas, Tiwas and even Mishings can be more meaningfully understood as attempts at decentering the earlier totalizing and homogenizing 'centres' of an overarching Assamese identity.

Thus the key theoretical issue that gets confirmed out of the scenario of the student youth movements is whether assertion of a set of perceived rights requires an ontological grounding of group identity? (Bisawas, 2007: 116).

The left liberal position centers on a larger common identity that overcomes ethnic, tribal and communal boundaries. But social and political identities as collective actors ground themselves in immediate cultural contexts which the left liberal consider as inappropriate because of inherent divisive potential of such as a strategy. The correctness of the left liberal position could be observed in the claims and counter claims made by identities pitted against one another and thereby providing a handle to the state in crushing this movement through deploying 'legitimate looking policies and programmes'. Linking this situation to two styles of youth mobilization as mentioned above, one could diagnose a tension inbuilt into the very process of youth mobilization in Assam. Seemingly there is an inherent negation of the force of the movement in determining a closure for itself. Left liberals bear the burden of a counter-hegemonic anti-state discourse of endless struggle not zeroing on distinct achievements, while ethnic and tribal mobilizations end

up in erecting impervious social and cultural boundaries that posit the burden of an internal autonomy. So it is the strategy of negotiating such closures that effectively decides the role of a particular student organisation in the discourse of contemporary student politics in Assam.

Therefore the work tends to argue, the crux problem of the student movement in Assam as in other part of India is the failure of political participation to cross the boundaries of traditional liberal concerns centering around the individual citizen's engagements or alienation which is extremely essential for multiethnic or multicultural democracies like India. (Barman, 1991:88).

The Critique Offered by Student Politics in Assam:

We have observed that the transformatory potential of these movements lies between the two binaries of (a) structural critique and (b) institutional critique.

As we have seen, identity crisis may not necessarily be an 'aggravated' one in that the changes in 'others' and in the 'social network' are neither rapid nor radical to precipitate such protests that are unlikely to be contained and absorbed by established social and political institutions. This in other words, sparks off non-insurgent forms of protests normally culminating in mutually acceptable Memoranda and Accords. On the other hand, the work argues that even insurgent forms of protest, as the rise of ULFA as a radical fringe of the Assam movement exemplifies, culminates out of the perceived success or failure of a particular student movement.

Thus, student movements in Assam have neither been mere reform movements nor revolutions, but they tend to fall in between these two, i.e, a transformative movement aiming at bringing about middle-level structural changes in the distribution of power and in the system of differential allocation of resources. However the wider consequences

It is to be further observed that student movements have been acting more as a catalyst rather than being the central force in social movements. It can implant the seeds for many an important changes, though it cannot bring about the changes.

From the point of view of the liberal character, student movements are reformist. Its aim is not the uprooting of the establishment or a social revolution, though it can be anti-authority only to some extent. With apparent degree of radicalism, the students in essence demand a comprehensive reform of the contemporary system in the country.

The rapid changes in the leadership and the loose organisational structure of a student movement are outcomes of the rapidity of the phenomena of student movements, and the ideological fragility. It causes in a fragile organisational control mechanism for the student movements.

Some observers have pointed out that the increasing corruption within the students' leadership and its alleged nexus with the business classes as being the reason for the gradual indifference of student organisations like AASU towards the problems of price rise, black marketing etc, whereas some of the most successful early mass mobilisation under the banner of different student organisation was around the issues of price rise.

In fact one can observe a strong tendency in student organisations like AASU getting institutionalized in a politics of compromise and accommodation.

One perceptive scholar writes "No action of the student leadership can be protested by the honest students, although the majority of the students understand the leadership's intention. One need not go far to seek an explanation. During the AGP rule only the organisation of the AASU was made watertight and entrusted on an experienced and senior leadership so that in the near future (at least as long as AGP is in power) the student society in Assam cannot play any revolutionary role. Now and then doing a little bit of noise and thus acting like a safety valve, when the people get annoyed, is all the 'revolutionary' role that the student's union plays now" (Bora, 2001: 335) (translation mine)

Thus one sees an alarming tendency growing with a section of the dominant student groups of feigning 'non-political' while they want to enter the power arena riding on the shoulders of the established political parties without themselves doing formal 'politics'.

Whither Student Movements in Assam?

Student politics in the state continues to manifest in the forms of movements of various types, of changing orientations and shifting constituencies.

We have discussed the growing polarization as well as emerging dynamics of new solidarities within the student groups of the state. Where, issues like demand for tribal status, job reservation and such binds the smaller ethnic minority student groups, issues of foreign illegal immigration, economic empowerment and so on still unites the student groups of various shades.

We saw that whereas the student organisations espousing ethno-centric agendas (for example ABSU, TMPK) have emerged as the most effective bodies for the respective community mobilisation and arena for powerful negotiations for issues of community rights and identities, the student groups that talks the language of a majoritarian nationalism rooted in the middle-class civil society (AASU for example), have retained its hold only on the ethnic majority Assamese speakers in the Brahmaputra valley, and even then plugged by internal fissures in the majority nationalism as represented by groups espousing radical nationalism (for example AJYCP).

In this context it is ironic that largely the tone of the critique offered by the student movements in Assam has been in effect being decided by the parameters of the institutions, in terms of their negation or accommodation. It is this overarching state-building process put into operation in Assam through the hegemonising drive of a particular form of Assamese nationalism that animates the discourse of student politics in Assam, through its multiple manifestations and reactions.

Students in Assam may be thus termed as Altbach puts it, “an incipient elite”, the elite that perceives a given region within a nation as its political constituency and struggles to protect the interests of that particular region, by demanding changes in the policies of the “national elite”(Altbach, 1967).

The most striking feature of student movements in Assam is its mass rural base, and therein lays its roots (Baruah, 2003: 22). Student leaders of student agitations and movements at different historical times have all agreed that the greatest support has

always come from the vast rural areas and have described them as more militant and therefore had often played vanguard roles (Deka Meeta,1997:20-27).

As we have observed, another aspect of the student movements in Assam and its success in most programmes and operations lies in the unity of different student organizations in the time of crises, although ideologically they may be drifted away. This unity could be traced throughout the different phases of agitations. The formation of the AASU in 1967 and its survival as an umbrella organization is a clear example of this unity (Deka Meeta, 1997: 35). In later years and most crucially with escalation of the former unity, a specific form of unity has been observed between the students groups of various sizes and shades in the state around some specific programmes and platforms which can be bound only by specific agendas of 'ethnic identities and indigenous rights' and tempered with some historical realities.

Thus the observations on Assam highlight the significant congruence and contradictions between different markers of social mobilisation like nationalism, ethnicity and class in the platform of student movements. Given the social rootedness of the student movements, the future trends and potential impact of the student politics in Assam that over a time has fermented into a largely fissured student movements scenario, will be significantly influenced by the way contradictions brewing in the nationality formation process in Assam develops.

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APPENDIX

ASSAM ACCORD

15 August, 1985

Accord between AASU, AAGSP and Central Govt,
on the Foreign National issue

MEMORANDUM OF SETTLEMENT

1. Government have all along being most anxious to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of foreigners in Assam. The All Assam Student Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) have also expressed their keenness to find such a solution.
2. The AASU through their Memorandum dated 2nd February 1980 presented to the late Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi, conveyed their profound sense of apprehensions regarding the continuing influx of foreign nationals into Assam and the fear about adverse effects upon the political, social, cultural and economic life of the State.
3. Being fully alive to the genuine apprehensions of the people of Assam, the then Prime Minister initiated the dialogue with the ASSU/AAGSP. Subsequently, talks were held at the Prime Minister's and Home Minister's levels during the period 1980-83. Several rounds of informal talks were held during 1984. Formal discussions were resumed in March, 1985.
4. Keeping all aspects of the problem including constitutional and legal provisions, international agreements, national commitments and humani-tarian considerations, it has been decided to proceed as follows:-

Foreigners Issue

- 5.1 For purposes of detection and deletion of foreigners, 1.1.1966 shall be the base date and year.
- 5.2 All persons who came to Assam prior to 1.1.1966, including those amongst them whose names appeared on the electoral rolls used in 1967 elections, shall be regularized.
- 5.3 Foreigners who came to Assam after 1.1.1966 (inclusive) and upto 24th March 1971 shall be detected in accordance with the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964.
- 5.4 Names of foreigners so detected will be deleted from the electoral rolls in force. Such persons will be required to register themselves before the Registration Officers of the respective districts in accordance with the provisions of the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939 and the Registration of Foreigners Rules, 1939.
- 5.5 For this purpose, the Govt. of India will undertake suitable strengthening of the government machinery.
- 5.6 On the expiry of a period of ten year following the date of detection, the names of all such persons which have been deleted from the electoral rolls shall be restored.
- 5.7 All persons who were expelled earlier, but have since re-entered illegally into Assam, shall be expelled.
- 5.8 Foreigners who came to Assam on or after March 25, 1971 shall continue to be detected, deleted and expelled in accordance with law. Immediate and practical steps shall be taken to expel such foreigner.
- 5.9 The government will give one consideration to certain difficulties expressed by the AASU/AAGSP regarding the implementation of the illegal migrants (Determination by Tribunals Act, 1983).

Safeguards and Economic Development

6. Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, shall be provided

to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.

7. The government take this opportunity to renew their commitment for the speedy all round economic development of Assam, so as to improve the standard of living of the people. Special emphasis will be placed on education and science & technology through establishment of national institutions.

Other Issues

- 8.1 The government will arrange for the issue of citizenship certificates in future only by the authorities of the Central Government.
- 8.2 Specific complaints that may be made by the AASU/AAGSP about irregular issuance of Indian Citizenship Certificates (ICC) will be looked into.
- 9.1 The international border will be made secure against future infiltration by erection of barriers like walls, barbed wire fencing and other obstacles at appropriate places. Patrolling by security forces on land and riverine routes all along the international border shall be adequately intensified. In order to further strengthen the security arrangements, to prevent effectively future infiltration, an adequate number of check posts shall be set up.
- 9.2 Besides the arrangement mentioned above and keeping in view security considerations, a road all along the international border shall be constructed so as to facilitate patrolling by security forces. Land between border and the road shall be kept free of habitation, wherever possible. Riverine patrolling along the international border would be intensified. All effective measures would be adopted to prevent infiltrators crossing or attempting to cross the international border.
10. It will be ensured that relevant laws for prevention of encroachment of government lands and lands in

tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws.

11. It will be ensured that the relevant law restricting acquisition of immovable property by foreigners, in Assam is strictly enforced.
12. It will be ensured that Birth and Death Registers are duly maintained.

Restoration of Normalcy

13. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) call off the agitation, assure full co-operation and dedicate themselves towards the development of the country.
14. The Central and the State Government have agreed to:
 - (a) review with sympathy and withdraw cases of disciplinary action taken against employees in the context of the agitation and to ensure that there is no victimization;
 - (b) frame a scheme for ex-gratia payment to the next of kin of those who were killed in the course of the agitation;
 - (c) give sympathetic consideration to proposal for relaxation of upper age limit for employment in public services in Assam, having regard to exceptional situation that prevailed in holding of academic and competitive examinations, etc. in the context of agitation in Assam;
 - (d) undertake review of detention cases, if any, as well as cases against persons charged with criminal offences in connection with the agitation, except those charged with commission of heinous offences;
 - (e) consider withdrawal of the prohibitory orders/notifications in force if any.
15. The Ministry of Home Affairs will be the nodal Ministry for the implementation of the above.

Sd / -
(P.K. Mahanta)
President
All Assam Students' Union

Sd / -
(R.D. Pradhan)
Home Secretary
Govt. Of India

Sd / -
(B.K. Phukan)
General Secretary
All Assam Students' Union
Govt. of Assam

Sd / -
(Smt. P.P. Trivedi)
Chief Secretary

Sd / -
(Biraj Sharma)
Convenor
All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad

In the presence of
Sd / -
(RAJIV GANDHI)
PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA

Date: 15th August, 1985.

Place: New Delhi.

1. Election Commission will be requested to ensure preparation of fair electoral rolls.
2. Time for submission of claim and objections will be extended by 30 days, subject to this being consistent with the Election Rules.
3. The Election Commission will be requested to send Central Observers.

Sd / - Illegible
HOME SECRETARY

1. Oil refinery will be established in Assam.
2. Central Government will render full assistance to the State Government in their efforts to re-open :
 - (i) Ashok Paper Mill
 - (ii) Jute Mills
3. I.I.T. will be set up in Assam.

Sd / - Illegible
HOME SECRETARY

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Appendix-II

MEMORANDUM OF SETTLEMENT (BODO ACCORD)

February 20, 1993
Guwhati

1. Preamble

- (i) Both the Government of India and the Government of Assam have been making earnest efforts to bring about an amicable solution to the problems of the Bodos and other Plains Tribunals living in the north bank of river Brahmaputra within Assam.
- (ii) Towards this end, the Government of India held a series of meeting with the State Government as well as with leaders if All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC). The State Government has also separately held discussion with the Bodo leaders. As a result it has been considered necessary to set-up and administrative authority within the State of Assam under a scheme, the details of which are outlined in the succeeding paragraphs:-

2. Objective

The objective of this scheme is to provide maximum autonomy within the frame work of the Constitution to the Bodos for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement.

3. (a) Name: Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC)

There shall be formed, by an Act of Assam Legislative Assembly, a Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) within the State of Assam comprising contiguous geographical areas between river Sankosh and Mazbat/river Pasnoi. The Land records authority of the state will scrutinize the list of villages furnished by ABSU/BPAC having 50% and more of tribal population which shall be included in the BAC. For the purpose of providing a contiguous areas, over the villages having than 50% tribal population shall be included. BAC will also include Reserve Forest as per the guidelines laid by Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Environment and Forest, Govt. of India not otherwise required by the Government for manning the international borders and tea gardens located completely within the BAC contiguous area.

b) Powers

The BAC will comprise of a General Council comprising 40 members, 35 elected on the basis of adult suffrage and having a life of five years. The Government will have powers to nominate 5 members to the Council, particularly from groups which could not otherwise be represented. This council will have powers to make bye-laws, rules and orders for application within the BAC area on the subjects enumerated in Schedule 'A'.

c) The Executive Authority of the BAC would be exercised in its Executive Body to be known as Bodoland Executive Council (BEC). The BEC will be responsible for implementation within the BAC area of the laws on subjects enumerated in Schedule A.

d) The General council and the BEC will hold office during the pleasure of the Governor of Assam. Consultation with the State Law Department of Government of Assam would be necessary if Governor proposed to dissolve either the General Council or the BEC before the expiry of its terms in accordance with the provisions of law. The executive authority of the BEC will be exercised by the party enjoying a simple majority in the General council. On completion of

elections, the Governor would invite the leader of the majority party to constitute the BEC.

4. Finances

- (i) (a) The finances for the BAC will be earmarked under a separate sub-head within the state budget, in keeping with the guidelines laid down by the Government of India from time to time. The Government of Assam would have no powers to divert this earmarked allocation to other heads/ areas except in exigencies when there is unavoidable overall Budget cut.
- (ii) The provisions made in 4(i) (a) regarding allocation of funds should be in the line with the spirit of the constitution (seventy second) and (seventy third) amendment.
- (iii) The BAC would also receive grant-in-aid from time to time within the principles and policies enunciated by the Government of India.
- (iv) The General Council will have powers to raise finances from levies/taxes etc. on subjects mentioned in Schedule 'A' subject to constitutional amendment mentioned above.
- (v) The finances for the BAC will be managed exclusively by its General Council and the statement of its annual audited accounts will be laid on the table of the State Assembly.

5. Powers of Appointment

The Bodoland Executive Committee would have powers to appoint Class III and Class IV staff within its jurisdiction for implementation of schemes connected with the subjects enumerated in Schedule 'A'.

6. Reservation of Seats

The Election Commission of India will be requested by the BAC to consider seat reservation and delimitation of constituencies, both Lok Sabha and State Assembly, within the BAC area to the extent permitted by the Constitution and the law.

7. Chairman, BPAC Special Provisions for the BAC Area

The General Council shall be consulted and its views shall be given due regard before any law made on the following subjects is implemented in the BAC area:-

- (i) the religious or social practice of the Bodos.
- (ii) The Bodo Customary laws and procedures; and
- (iii) The ownership and transfer of land within and BAC area.

8. Special Status for the Bodoland and Autonomous Council

The BAC shall, within the laws of the land take steps to protect the demographic complexion of the areas falling within its jurisdiction.

9. Special Courts

Action will be taken in consultation with the Guwahati High Court to set up within BAC Special Courts as specified below to try suits and cases between parties all of whom belong to scheduled Tribe or Tribes in accordance with the tribal customary law and procedure if any.

- (a) Village Courts.
- (b) Subordinate District Customary Law Courts within a Civil Sub-divisional Territory, and
- (c) District Customary Law Court.

10. Appointment in the Central Bodies

The claims of the Bodos shall be considered for appointment to the North Eastern Council.

11. Official Language

The General Council can lay down policy with regard to use of Bodo Language as medium of official correspondence within the BAC area. However, while corresponding with offices outside the BAC area, correspondence will have to

be in bilingual form in accordance with the Article 345 of the Constitution and the provision of law in this behalf.

12. Change in Geographical Boundary

The Government areas of the Bodoland Autonomous Council as agreed upon can be changed with the mutual consent of the BAC and the Government of Assam.

13. Revision of List of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

The scheduling and de-scheduling of scheduled castes and schedule tribes residing within the Bodo areas will be down as per the commission appointed by the Government of India under the constitution.

14. Trade and Commerce

The General Council will have powers to regulate trade and commerce within its jurisdiction in accordance with the existing law. For this purpose, it can issue permits and licenses to individuals within the BAC areas. The Government of Assam and the Union Government while considering allotment of permits to people residing within the BAC areas will give preference to the Bodos.

15. Employment Opportunities

The BAC will have powers, to reserve jobs for Scheduled Tribes within its jurisdiction. However, exercise of such powers shall be in accordance with the existing constitutional and legal provisions.

16. Civil and Police services

- (i) The Government of Assam may from time to time post officers of the rank of Class II and above to posts within the BAC in accordance with the exigencies. While making

these postings due regard will be given the views of BAC about officers being so posted.

- (ii) The officers posted to the BAC areas will be accountable to the BAC for the performances and the assessment of their work recorded by the BEC authorities, will be incorporated to their ACRs by the State Government.
- (iii) The Central Government, while making recruitment from the state of Assam to the Army, para-military forces and police units, will hold special recruitment drives within the BAC area.

17. Appointment of Interim Bodoland Executive Council

The Government of Assam will take steps for the formations of an Interim Bodoland Executive Council for the BAC from amongst the leaders of the present Bodoland movement who are signatories to this settlement, during the transition period, i.e. prior to the holding of elections. Such Interim Council would be formed before a prescribed date mutually agreed between the Central and State Government.

18. Relief and Rehabilitation

- (i) ABSU-BAPC leaders will take immediate steps to bring overground and deposit with the District authorities all arms, ammunition and explosives in the possession of their own supporters and will co-operate with the administration in bringing overground all Bodo militants along with their arms and ammunition etc. within one month of the formation of the Interim BEC. In order to ensure the smooth return to civil life of the cadre and to assist in the quick restoration of peace and normalcy. Such surrenders made voluntarily, will not attract prosecution.
- (ii) The Government of Assam will consider sympathetically the withdrawal of all cases against persons connected with the Bodoland Movements excluding those relating to heinous crimes.
- (iii) The Government of India will initiate steps for review of action against the Bodo employees of Government of India and subordinate offices as well as in respect of central

Government Undertakings. Similar action would be taken by the Government of Assam.

- (iv) The Government of Assam will initiate immediate steps for suitable rehabilitation of the Bodo militants coming overground, as a result of this settlement. Similarly, the Government will organise ex-gratia payments as per rules to next of the kins killed during the Bodo agitation.

19. Share in Collection of Excise Duty on Tea

The Government of Assam will deposit in the BAC Fund revenue collected from the tea gardens falling within the BAC area.

20. Protection of Rights of Non-tribals

The Government of Assam and the BAC will jointly ensure that all rights and interests of the non-tribals as on date living in BAC area in matters pertaining to land as well as their language protected.

21. Ad-hoc Central grant for Lunching the BAC

After the signing of this settlement, an ad-hoc Budget on reasonable basis will be prepared by Interim BEC and discussed with the State and Central Government for necessary financial support.

Sd/- (S.K. Bwiswamutary)
President ABSU

Sd/-
(K.S. Rao)
Chief Secretary to
the Government of Assam

Sd/- (Rabi Ram Brahma) Add.
General Secretary, ABSU

Sd/- (Subhash Basumatari)
Chairman, BPAC

In the presence of

Sd/- (Rajesh Pilot)
(Minister of State
International Security)
Government of India

Sd/- (Hiteswar Saikia)
Chief Minister of Assam
Minister of Home Affairs
State Govt. of Assam