CONTEXT AND TEXT OF THE TAI-AHOMS OF ASSAM:
A STUDY ON IDENTITY

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

Identity denotes an individual's distinctive character or affiliation shared by the members of a particular social category. It is the role that one plays in their day to day life, an answer to the question 'who s/he is?' Identity can be based on gender, religion, region, occupation, kinship. Both individual and collective identities have been a subject of study across the social sciences which are evident from the works of Erikson, Tajfel and Turner. The traditional conception about identity as a fixed notion has been challenged time and again by postmodernists. In identity studies, the subject of exploration includes the tension between individual identity and the constraints of social structure (sociology), cultural expression of identity and its meaning (anthropology), individual identity as well as social identity (social psychology). The last decade has seen a rise in the interest in identity studies.

Identity politics focusing on the questions of recognising cultural diversity, the status and rights of immigrants, the rights of indigenous people, and the need for group representation and rights have become a part of academic as well as public debate in recent years. Membership to a territory that becomes the object of individual loyalty is one of the chief identities of individuals. In the present scenario where the world is divided into countries with territorial borders, such loyalties are considered far more significant than any other type of political and social organisation and more so as a means of individual and world security. It permeates all aspects of life and hence is an important topic of inquiry in academic discourse.

Nations emerged with the decline of dynastic rules such as in Europe and also when liberation movements arose in colonies of the imperialist countries that took refuge in nationalist sentiments to establish independent and sovereign nations. The development of nationalism in the third world countries does not follow the same trajectory as that of the capitalist countries. While in the capitalist countries, it was part of the emergence of the bourgeois order in opposition to feudalism, in the third world countries it came up as a reaction to colonialism. Colonialism had introduced market system by transcending localism and facilitated the coming together of people belonging

to different tribes or linguistic communities to participate in a national struggle against colonialism. After the second world war, when most of the colonised countries were decolonised and had the opportunity to form their own government structure with territorial sovereignty, it still remained as a continuation of the administrative boundaries established by the imperialist power in most cases.

Nationalism as a subject of study became prominent in the nineties with disturbances that came up in Rwanda, former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet republics. Issue of nationalism involves dilemma regarding solidarity with oppressed national groups on the one hand and the repulsion to crimes perpetrated in the name of nationalism on the other, along with the treatment of ethnic and cultural differences within democratic polity. In recent years, the focus of the debate about nationalism has shifted towards issues in international justice, issues of terrorism, territory and territorial rights connected with questions of boundaries, migrations, resource and ecology rights.

The concept of nation, state, nationalism cut through academic boundaries and has been dealt with by historians, political scientists, sociologists, economists. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kedourie, James Mill, Renan, Hobsbawm, Anderson, Smith and Gellner have contributed to the understanding of these concepts. The studies have linked it with sentiment, we-feeling, common culture and history, enforced homogenisation which opens up the scope for further debates. While doing so, the historicity of the subject needs to be taken into account. Importance to shared history, territory, culture ignores the fact that the communities residing in a nation may not necessarily share a common history or culture. Thus this view underestimates the historical longevity of ethnic ties and sentiments, geographical and cultural diversity. To counter such a definition, liberal conceptions have come up that recognises nation-state as a misnomer and argues for a liberal multicultural citizenship. It is at times difficult to create a clear distinction between nationalist aspirations and identity assertions. There exists a politics of identity behind the formation of every nation and hence even after the formation of nations, demands for territorial autonomy, separate identity on different grounds still come up within a nation.

Sathyamurthy (1996) mentions three tsunamis that can be used to analyse the political experience of the post-colonial Indian state. The first tsunami was the division of post-independence India into a number of linguistic states that were earlier provinces created out to assist administrative purpose. In the second tsunami, regional movements with ethno-nationalist flavor that later became demand for autonomy started rising in the north-eastern periphery of India during the 1960s and in the south during the 1950s and 1960s. The third tsunami marked the opposition of the national ruling party by the masses fuelled by the experiences of India's Internal Emergency of 1975-77. It marked the beginning for a demand of democracy of mass participation. The last two decades have witnessed new struggles for human and economic rights and local autonomy. However these are yet to exert a unified influence or bring about a change in the power structure. Sometimes in order to assert a separate identity, culture is constructed by reviving historical cultural practices which define the boundaries of collective identity and in the process ethnic identities are reinvented. Identities are also constructed to resist assimilation and out of fear of marginalisation.

The states in post-independent India were organised primarily on the basis of languages and the rise of autonomy demands only further aggravated the linguistic reorganisation of the states. It is possible to view the ongoing problems in Assam and Punjab as a continuation of it. In the north-eastern region of the country, separate states were carved out from the previously existing state of Assam owing to demand of autonomy and within Assam itself a new internal contradiction was brought to the fore.

In India, the demand of Khalistan or the Punjab question is embedded in the growing political, economic and cultural resentment of the Sikh community which is distinctive in a religious sense. Though the Sikh population had demanded for a separate statehood based on language, the Indian government did not give in to their political and administrative claims due to Punjab's strategic position as a border State on the north-western periphery of India, the other half of which was in neighbouring Pakistan. The re-drawing of State boundaries in the north-west in 1966, leading to the establishment of Haryana and a new Punjab was seen by majority of the Sikh people as a discriminatory policy of the Indian government.

The north-eastern region houses different communities following its own distinct culture and lifestyle. Due to the policy of exclusion followed by the British administrators, there had been little contact between the inhabitants of this region with the rest of the 'country'. In the post-independence era, demands for different degrees of relative autonomy were made by the people of the north-eastern region. The Indian government too pursued a policy of resources and repression whereby though resources are provided to the region, oppression is carried out at the hands of the army in order to repress the autonomy demands.

Assam, which was not a well defined state but a collection of several kingdoms before the introduction of British rule in the region, was made into one unit for administrative purpose by the British after they annexed Assam and the other parts of the north-east in 1826. This period is also seen as the loss of Assamese sovereignty. To facilitate the colonial economy dominated by tea plantations and the extraction of crude oil, the British encouraged the immigration of east Bengal Muslim peasants. It was the beginning of cultural nationalism in Assam as the Assamese felt threat to their distinct cultural identity from the immigrants. The post-independence era saw the rise of a mass agitation in Assam to counter unemployment, the administrative, political and military supremacy of New Delhi, the centre of the country. The leaders of the student union (All Assam Students Union) that had successfully led the Assam movement later formed the regional party Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and came to power but failed to fulfill their promises and let down the Assamese masses, including the various tribal peoples and ethnic communities. The United Liberation Front of Assam, a radical organisation, too came up during this period that put their faith in armed struggle and demanded the sovereignty of Assam. The common all Assam front that was constructed during the 1970s to support the Assam movement suffered a breakdown later on. After the electoral victory of AGP, conflicts arose between the Assamese and the Bodo segments of the AGP leadership. Bodo militancy gathered momentum within a year and the AGP government's repression against it intensified, which came to seen as similar to that of the Congress(I) repression which they themselves had resisted not so long ago. Later on other communities within Assam too felt the need to demand autonomy for themselves and more than often Assamese hegemony is cited as the reason. In this study, the case of

identity struggle carried on by the Tai-Ahom community will be studied in order to look at the politics of identity assertion.

Intellectual Framework of the Study

Sociology is no longer confined to studying society and its institutions only through textual analysis and fieldwork but films, literatures, paintings, dance forms have become an integral part of sociological investigation which are used as texts to explore social dynamics. Just as literary works can be seen as social texts; these too can be 'read' to understand culture, socialisation, identity, inequalities, and social structures. They can be important narratives that provide frames to understand society. Films can be used as social texts in the discipline of Sociology to explore identity, interaction, inequality and institutions as presented in the film content. The emphasis then is on the narration of stories rather than on the technical aspects of film production. Films are an important source for Sociologists as they elicit, structure, and facilitate the expression of different human emotions, and reflect as well as create culture. While reading a movie as a text, sometimes Sociologists also have to transform from their role from being an audience of a movie to an observer of audience behavior. In a similar way dance can be read as a text to explore symbolic meanings through the questions of sex and gender, body movement. Dance grows out of culture and feeds back into it and can help one understand cultural constructs. It can be entertainment, play, art, ritual where context is important in deriving meaning. Using a movie, picture, dance form or a movement in the form of a text in academic discourse is like reading a book, the only difference lies in it not being available in written format. The different strands of ideas are absorbed by the researchers which are then later used for analysis. This work is a modest attempt to read the Tai-Ahom identity struggle as a text while looking at the idea of identity construction and the politics involved in it.

The political scenario in South Asia is dominated by separatist movement making their claims over parts of existing nations which at times turn violent. These movements are driven by geopolitical context, a shared belief in their unique and distinct cultural identity, which are justified in the demand for an exclusive homeland. Question remains whether these are separatist movement or nationalist aspirations on the part of those

struggling for it. The state government against which it is carried out views it as secession, a threat to law and order. On the other hand, those fighting for recognition consider their claims justified by their unique identities derived from their affinity with a particular language, religion, ethnicity or region. Kinship ties, traditional social institutions, culture are used as political resources to challenge the existing territorial authority and generate the necessary political power to give territorial expression to demands for an imagined homeland.

Identity movement demands the search for symbolic recognition by a significant other and the defense of interests and promotion of rights of certain groups who feel discriminated against. Collective identities are constructed to promote the interest of the group which is then asserted. Search for recognition involving negotiation and sometimes struggle is probably the main feature of identity movements. Relationship with the other is the issue behind identity assertion. One of the main problems that nations today face is the recognition of various nations within their own territory. Most of the political states that came up after the Second World War now face the question of legitimacy and stability and their authority over the territory is contested by groups claiming unique identities. The core and periphery regions introduced during Colonial rule remained intact even after the transfer of power to the natives. Apart from cultural uniqueness, demands for separate identity and homeland are also made on the grounds of exploitation of resources where the centre is accused of acting as the 'colonial master' exploiting the periphery for its own good. Identity assertion at times leading to autonomy demands have become a major characteristic of post-independence politics in India.

In case of India, numerous independent kingdoms were united to form a political India only after the British rule was established. As the nation tries to bring together its people under common national symbols and idea of nationalism, some groups get further separated on the pretext of resisting homogenisation and preservation of its culture. The assertion of one's identity is the means by which communities indicate their distinctiveness and resist being marginalised by the majority. Such assertion often leads to demands for separate statehood, a result of the struggle between local and national identity.

Assam provides a fertile ground to study identity politics. While it asserts its identity on the Indian nation – Assam movement (1979-85)[1] – ethnic communities of the state are asserting their identity within the state and demanding autonomy. Their resistance is against the increased assimilation into the greater Assamese culture. However, the assimilation of Tai-Ahoms with the rest of the population was due to the state policy of the Ahom rulers which in turn destroyed their own culture. Their culture, language is almost at the verge of extinction and they now demand recognition from the Indian government. Hence, from assimilation, now their focus has shifted to separation. The Tai population is spread over south-east Asia and is known by various local names. In India they are grouped into Ahom, Aiton Khamti, Phake, Khamyang, Turung. The Ahoms migrated to the north-eastern part of India from Mong Mao that bordered the South-western region of China and Northern Myanmar and ruled Assam under the Tai prince Chaolung Sue-Ka-Pha from A.D.1228 to 1826. Though initially they practiced ancestor worship and spoke Tai language, later on their language and culture got completely assimilated with the local culture and most of the Ahom population converted to Hinduism. Their condition deteriorated with the colonial rule and they are now trying to forge an identity separate from the Assamese.

Concerns of the Study

The definitions of 'state', 'nation' emphasises on homogeneity and Nationalism is seen as a sentiment developed on the basis of that homogeneity. But this homogeneity is usually constructed politically. The idea behind this construction is to maintain the unity of the nation by binding its inhabitants with imagined kinship ties. The meaning of nationality, its definition and boundaries are always subject to changes. There are several ways of conceptualising the Assamese nationality, which has now come to be synonymous with caste Hinduism[2]. This particular imagination threatens and marginalises smaller groups and communities that are on the periphery of Hinduism or are not Hindus. Tai-Ahoms have raised a very significant question about the drive to homogenise Hindu culture in Assam as it is elsewhere in India that goes against the multi-religious and multicultural

[1] For details on 'Assam movement' refer to Baruah (1999)
[2] This is a term coined to refer to the 'non ethnic' Assamese who follow Hinduism. The term is mentioned in Saikia (2005).

societies that together constitute the Assamese. To avoid marginalisation and to assert their identity separate from that of 'Assamese', the Tai-Ahoms have constructed and follow cultural and religious symbols and ceremonies different from the rest of the population. The study of the Tai-Ahom identity struggle will help in understanding the role of cultural and historical consciousness in identity politics and its challenge to the idea of nationalism born out of an enforced similarity.

Scope of the Study

This study deals with the issue of Tai-Ahom identity assertion. In the course of the discussion, nation, state and nationalism will also be considered as critical contexts of identities and the manner in which the demand for regional autonomy or recognition of the separateness of a community is informed by these discursive categories. While doing so, it takes into consideration the continuing struggle of the Tai-Ahom community in Assam trying to assert an identity separate from that of the Assamese. The homogeneous identity that a nation tries to create is seen as a threat by minority communities to their culture and by extension existence. Hence they try to enforce their own distinctiveness. The Tai-Ahoms are tracing a history of their own to claim an identity separate from the history and culture of India. This study will discuss the preservation and acceptance of the history and culture of the Tai-Ahoms. While analysing the construction of a separate Ahom identity by the Tai-Ahoms, their construction of 'us' as against the 'them', i.e. Assamese community and at large the Indian state will be looked at along with the role of history and culture in the emergence of 'Ahomness'. It will also investigate how a separate identity will improve the status of the Ahoms. Further it will analyse whether the improvement in status is seen in terms of government benefits which they want to claim through their separate identity. Another point of inquiry is the way history is shaped in order to construct national consciousness on one hand and also to counter that very idea of national identity on the other hand. It further looks at the development of events in the politics of identity assertion and its objective.

Research Questions

While dealing with the context and text of identity assertion of the Tai-Ahom community of Assam, the study aims to look into the following issues:

- How identities are constructed as well as contested through history writing?
- Is assertion of identity a political tool?
- Is the assertion a means of countering the hegemonic Assamese and by extension Indian identity by the Tai-Ahom community?

The study shall be primarily carried out by reviewing the literatures. Thus it will be based on extensive use of secondary data which will include books, journals, newspaper articles and articles from the electronic medium. Here, the terms identity, identity politics, identity assertion, nation, state, nationalism will be defined as the chapters proceed with the discussion on the theories related to these terms.

Organisation of the Dissertation

This study is organised into three chapters, apart from the Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter 'Theories Revisited: Identity, Nation, State, Nationalism' is a discussion on the various theories of identity, identity politics, identity assertion along with nation, state and nationalism. The beginning of the chapter concentrates on the notion of identity as it exists in contemporary life as well as studied in academics. It then tries to find a connection of it with the construction of national identity such as nation, state and nationalism. The attempt is to find a linkage between the theory of recognition and identity assertion. The chapter will also discuss social identity theory taking into account the people as members of one group in relation to another and the consequences of such categorisation. In this respect, the development of a national identity can be seen as a part of the social identity. And thus the concepts of nation, state and nationalism are analysed to understand the idea of identity construction. The theories of nation, state and nationalism will provide the ground for 'reading' the Tai-Ahom identity struggle. Arguments are derived from the works of thinkers like Renan, Anderson, Hobsbawm, Smith, Weber, Aloysius, Gellner, and Kymlicka. The chapter will also analyse the linkages between the nation and state where nation-building is carried out as a process of homogenisation by ironing out differences with the idea of 'we are one' in which the narrative of the dominant group hegemonises and become the grand narrative.

The discontinuity between the idea of a nation and the experience of it creates a problem in the survival of the nation. India too suffers from this and in case of India, the

problem can be traced back to the way the Indian nation got imagined through the construction of a homogeneous culture and history. The second chapter 'Confronting Indian-ness: Nations within a Nation' focuses on India's problem of recognising 'nations' within its territorial boundary. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section discusses the imagination and creation of the Indian nation and the second section is an elaborate discussion on sub-national demand with Assam being the case of reference. The imagination of the Indian nation is a classic example of the hegemonic position enjoyed by culture in nationalist constructs. Nationalist historiography has attempted to preserve the grand narrative of the one Indian identity by ignoring the different collective or individual identity which also needs to be recognised. As a resistance to the idea of a homogeneous India, unequal distribution of resources, perceived neglect on the basis of 'centre' and 'periphery', there have been demands of state formation and reorganisation by a region within the organised states which at times takes the shape of separatist and secessionist movements. These are usually treated as a threat to national integration and coherence. The chapter will look at relationship of the 'people' and the political authority while carrying out a discussion on the thinning distinction between nation-building and state building under the overwhelming presence of the state. In the name of nation-building, state provides legitimacy to violence which can be clearly seen when the state, acting as a brute force[3], is trying to 'govern' the people in Manipur, Kashmir with draconian laws of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 (AFSPA)[4]. While discussing the problems inherent in the construction of the Indian nation, this chapter will also take into consideration various identity movements such as liberation movements going on in Kashmir, Nagaland, Manipur and Assam which opens up the discussion on the Assamese identity construction that forms the theme of the second section. While the autonomy movement in Assam demands separation from India; there is strife within

[3] Hanjian (2003) mentions that brute force is the threat or use of physical power and is sometimes used by the state to impose citizenship.

[4] Under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, security forces are given unrestricted and unaccounted power in an area declared to be disturbed. For further details refer to http://www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/resources/armed_forces.htm, http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/armed_forces_special_powers_act1958.pdf, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/document/actandordinances/armed_forces_special_power_act_1958.htm, http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Law/2005/afspa.htm

Assam where ethnic communities such as Bodos, Dimasas, Ahoms are fighting against the Assamese hegemony. While analysing the construction of Assamese identity, it will look into the regional identity of Assam in relation to the national identity. It will also look into the manifestation of Assamese identity, how it came about and how it is confronted by other ethnic communities within the state. The recurrent politics of micro-nationalism in the north-eastern state of Assam is an assertion of its distinct language and culture against the homogenising nature of the Indian state and fear of minoritisation among the Assamese and other indigenous people hightened by heavy immigration. Underdevelopment of the state is another major theme which takes into account the centre-periphery debate. The chapter will try to critically analyse nationalist project of nation-building which fails to acknowledge that diversity does not easily yield to territorial boundedness. The greater Assamese identity is a combined identity formed by Tai-Ahoms as well as non-Ahoms. Just like the Bodos, Dimasas, etc.; the Tai-Ahoms too are resisting their peripheralising in the hands of the established Assamese nationalism. By establishing Ahom organisations and using narratives, cultural symbols, festivals, rituals, belief systems they are trying to maintain their distinctiveness. The same Tai-Ahom community that had once contributed to the Assamese identity formation is now aspiring for a separate identity within the state.

The third chapter 'The Tai-Ahom Identity' looks into the advent of Tai-Ahoms in Assam, why there is a demand for separate identity by them, factors driving their identity movement and its present dynamics. At the beginning of the chapter, an introduction to the Tai population is given which will help in understanding the debate where the Ahoms are looking for support for their identity struggle from south-east Asia. Tai speaking population is widely distributed over Southeast Asia and are known by various local names. In India, the Tai speakers are grouped into Ahom, Aiton Khamti, Phake, Khamyang, Turung. This study focuses on the Ahoms who had migrated to north eastern part of India in 1228 A.D.. The chapter discusses in details the marginalisation of the Tai-Ahoms and their attempts to revive their lost status. The Tai-Ahom demands can be identified as belonging to an identity struggle aiming at recognition that is looking for a connection with the south-east Asian region based on historical narratives. Assamese identity is an assimilated identity due to which the Tai-Ahoms fear their marginalisation.

Another important point of inquiry is the difference in the history and culture of the Tai-Ahoms with other parts of India which is seen as a major reason by them for asserting their separate identity, thus raising questions of national identity and identities within a nation.

Identity provides a sense of belonging and is a way of enforcing one's self against the hegemony of others. A community can assert its identity to resist homogenisation by a dominant culture. In such a case it is a reaction against the threat to its existence. When looked at from another perspective, there can also be aspirations on the part of the community to acquire state benefits. In case of the Tai-Ahoms, the demands of the movement have changed from a separate homeland or Ahomland to securing a separate non-Assamese identity as well as scheduled tribe status. The revival of Tai language and ceremonies are markers to reinforce a unique cultural identity different from the greater Assamese identity. The study thus looks at the politics of identity construction as well as its assertion while taking into account the context and text of the Tai-Ahoms of Assam.

Chapter- I

THEORIES REVISITED: IDENTITY, NATION, STATE, NATIONALISM

Identity is a part and parcel of an individual's everyday life yet it gets dissected as well as constructed into various forms. An individual carries a multiplicity of identity rather than a single one. The term 'identity', even after becoming a part of day-to-day conversation, still remains ambiguous as it is hardly defined and in most cases is taken for granted. Hence it is necessary to look at the discursive practice of it before proceeding to the politics of identity assertion. In this chapter, the notion of identity will be discussed as it is studied in academics and the politics of identity. It will further carry the discussion to the construction of the 'us' viv-a-vis the 'them', the people as members of one group in relation to the other and the consequences of such categorisation.

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology[5], the term 'identity' is derived from the Latin word 'idem' meaning sameness and continuity. The 20th century saw a rise in the usage of this term. It is used widely and loosely in reference to one's sense of self, and one's feelings and ideas about oneself, as for example in the terms of 'gender identity' or 'class identity'. Formation of identity cannot be separated from the expectations attached to the social roles occupied by individuals. Identities thus can be said to be internalised and constructed through the process of socialisation. Also, sometimes identities get construction for an individual during socialisation, or in their various roles. In simple terms, a person carries his/her identity in the name and the station he/she occupies in the community. Here, it is more to do with personal identity and includes a subjective sense of continuous existence and a coherent memory, a sense of sameness and continuity as an individual.

For Hegel, forms and institutions play a crucial role in shaping personality and the self and community gets constructed through the relationships between self and other. The self is not a simple, stable entity but creates itself in a continuous struggle to overcome the foreignness of the 'other'. While Descartes and Kant had presented

[5] Scott, John and Gordon Marshall . (ed.) (2009) Third edition revised, New York: Oxford University Press.

consciousness as a solitary entity confronting the outside world, Hegel insists that self is constituted reflexively and is radically dependent on the action of 'others'. Moral conflicts, personal disputes, and social antagonisms are partial expressions of this struggle, which creates the agreements and reciprocity necessary for the socialisation and the individuation of the subject. The identity of an individual is constructed through the recognition of his/her characteristics, attributes, and traits by others. Lack of recognition or misrecognition undermines the sense of identity, by projecting a false, inferior or defective image of self. This acknowledgement of the vital contribution that others make to the constitution of self reconciles or alienates the self (as is the case with non-recognition) with the world. In this sense, recognition is a mode of socialisation. The recognition of an individual's identity by others, makes him/her aware of his/her specificity and difference from all others and helping the growth of individuation.

The personal identity is associated with meanings and is structured. Identity has many aspects which derive from certain sources and find expression in particular social context. It would be wrong to consider it as a single homogeneous stock of traits, images and habits. Preston (1997, p.4) points out that:

> *'the substantive business of identity can be unpacked in terms of the ideas of locale, network and memory. This trio points to the ways in which we inhabit a particular place which is the sphere of routine activity and interaction and is richly suffused with meanings, which in turn is the base for a dispersed series of networks of exchanges with others centered on particular interests/concerns, all of which are brought together in the sphere of continually reworked memory'.*

Identity may refer to an individual's sense of 'belonging' and points of reference to the world in which he/she finds himself or herself. As has been mentioned, the last decade saw an increase in interrogating the concept of identity in the sphere of social sciences and there has been a considerable shift in its understanding. Identity, in the early twentieth century, was often defined according to 'objective' traits that one possess but today, the problem of identity is no longer seen in this light. In the present world, personal and collective identities overlap. The identity of individuals is constructed in day-to-day activities and in being members of several social networks and groups, and the society provides the elements that are required for self-definition. Unlike the

preceding generations, a person in the present globalised world has a web of choices and opportunities. Identities are formed on the basis of social processes of education, individual and collective fulfilment, social mobility, career mobility, geographical mobility, life style. The construction of collective identities get affected by immigration, urbanisation, international trade, unequal regional development, differing interpretations of the past, social conflicts, and social stratification. By internalising a particular social identity, one becomes part of the group, sees things from the group's perspective and behaves so as to enhance the evaluation of the in-group relative to the out-group and thereby enhance their own self-evaluation as group members. According to social identity theory, people derive part of their identity from membership in various social groups such as nation, ethnicity, religion, political party, gender or occupation and want to construct a positive identity of the group that can reflect back on the self.

Identity refers to familiarity and a sense of shared orientations in a community of the similar. It is shaped through the process of socialisation and the experiences involved in it which leads to one attaining individual-identity and self-respect. The community may not necessarily be confined to the family or kins but pervade geographical and historical boundaries. The shared attributes of physiological traits, psychological predispositions, regional features, or the properties of structural locations leads to we-feeling among the members in a group. The internalisation of the qualities that are required in order to be members of particular groups lead to a unified, singular social experience for them on the basis of which the sense of the self of the social actors get constructed.

According to the modernist view, identity even if acquired, depends on fundamental human traits of sociability and reason. Against the 'givenness' of identity, identity can also be seen as an acquired set of characteristics which can have multiple readings and interpretations. It is the outcome of a complex series of social processes, something that is learned and relearned over time. In accordance with the postmodernist argument, identity is radically fluid, shifting and malleable and can be made and remade as the agent desires. The social construction of complex identities is fluid, subtle and widely implicated in patterns of thought and action. Identity is not a fixed entity but is carried in language and made and remade in routine social practice. The discussion so far

clearly points out that identities are a result of social processes. It is never fixed but always shifting. Thus the argument, that identities are mere social constructions points out to the fact that it is possible to bring about changes in one's identity. The succeeding chapters will deal with these changes or construction of particular identities and the shifts in it.

Osaghae and Suberu (2005, p.5) relate identity with affinity, recognition, coherence and broadly define identity as 'any group attribute that provides recognition or definition, reference, affinity, coherence and meaning for individual members of the group, acting individually or collectively'. This view focuses the attention on Erikson's (1968a) characterisation of identity as the intersection between group and individual identity. The individual has an array of identities that he/she can decide to adopt or play up depending on the perception of the situation, including the identity adopted by competing actors. Recognition by others is an important aspect in the construction of identity. Identities are dynamic and develop in an ongoing dialogue with others, which keeps changing the image others have about an individual and re-draws his/her own self-image in the process.

It depends on the members of the group to decide which kind of identity they want to adhere to. There can be a sudden consciousness of identity and what has remained dormant at a point of time can become part of an active identity at some other times. It is almost impossible to have a single identity in the purest form as they are always intricately inter-connected and mutually reinforcing. The different structures or configurations of identities generate different levels or patterns of conflict. Deriving from Osaghae and Suberu's (2005, pp.5-6) study of Nigeria[6], ethnic and race based mobilisation can be taken as a good example of such a claim.

> *'[such mobilizations]…. evoke nationalist claims and notions of territoriality strong enough to challenge the validity of extant states, tend to be more violent and dangerous than gender or generation-based identities like youth, which*

[6] Eghosa E. Osaghae and Rotimi T. Suberu (2005) points out in the working paper no.6 'A History of Identities, Violence, and Stability in Nigeria', the crisis of territorial or state legitimacy, which has often challenged the efforts at national cohesion, democratisation, stability and economic transformation of Nigeria. It is one of the states of Africa deeply divided on the basis of politically salient identities, conflicts and instabilities.

usually do not involve territorial claims. To this extent, it is possible to distinguish territory-based identities, supposedly more volatile and prone to violent mobilization, and non-territory based identities, which are benign and amenable to regulation'.

The next section deals with a brief historical overview of how 'identity' as a concept has been dealt with by various disciplines starting from the period of enlightenment to the formation of the specialised disciplines.

Identity in Academic Writings

Identity has successfully grasped the interest of the academic world. It is central to the classical social scientific tradition and occupies a central position in the European tradition of social theorising. A few decades ago it was the philosophers, psychologists, and a few sociologists who used the concept in their writings whereas since the beginning of 1950s and lately in the 1970s, the concept has pervaded all kinds of academic discourse. Further, it has very successfully crossed academic boundaries and its importance as an area of discussion has rapidly increased today in all levels of political and everyday discourse, which is a new development. The recent popularity of the term 'identity' is brought into attention by Gleason (1983, p.910):

'……identity is a new term, as well as being an elusive and ubiquitous one. It came into use as a popular social- science term only in the 1950s. The contrast between its handling in two standard reference works dramatizes its novelty. The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, published in 1968, carries a substantial article on "Identity, Psychosocial", and another on "Identification, Political". The original Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, published in the early 1930s, carries no entry at all for identity, and the entry headed "Identification" deals with fingerprinting and other techniques of criminal investigation'.

During the age of the Enlightenment, theorists took the view that the social world could be understood and brought under human control. In turn, the classical nineteenth-century social theorists pursued the modernist project of the rational apprehension of the social world which involved a holistic, engaged and practical orientation to enquiry and action. The end of the nineteenth century saw a disagreement with this typical concern and strategy which carved the way for the familiar specialist social science disciplines to emerge. However, these specialised disciplines were not free from their own biases while

dealing with the concepts of social reality. Notwithstanding the internal diversity of the specialist social sciences, and contrary to the claims to technical value neutrality, each sphere affirms a conception of humankind and thereby a notion of the proper ordering of the collectivity.

Political theory regards individuals as citizens of polities concerned with states and ideologies. For Sociology, the discipline concerned with society and learning, individuals are members of societies. They are understood as distinct elements of wider systems of relationships which are reflexively apprehended as societies, which are thereafter ordered in a complex way. In the intellectual tradition concerned with culture, individuals are understood as inhabitants of language-carried traditions. The studies on culture is approached in a series of ways in cultural anthropology, in political sociology, in literature and humanities, cultural studies and is not confined to a single contemporary tradition. Within the sphere of cultural analysis, individuals are carriers/users of sets of ideas embedded within language and carried within developing traditions and such studies are associated with culture and tradition**.** Economics consider individuals to be autonomous with needs which are rationally satisfied via contractual exchanges in the free marketplace. Individuals exercise choices within a market in order to create lifestyles. The subject of study in this discipline revolves around markets and consumption. These disciplines developed during the twentieth century and are the product of a complex exchange between received tradition and the dynamics of the formation of institutionalised, professionalised spheres of enquiry.

The classical European tradition of social theorising was concerned with elucidating the dynamics of complex change within the political-economic, social-institutional and cultural spheres of the social world in the overall process of the shift to the modern world. The notion of complex change points to changes in political-economic structures, social institutional arrangements and patterns of cultural understandings. These patterns of changes are systematic, pervasive and inclusive. Social theorists are engaged with the task of grasping a process which enfolds them. In the studies of the classical tradition the issue of identity has figured quite centrally while carrying out the analyses of the complex change. The unstable nature of identity in the modern world, and the ambiguous nature of the system within which identity gets constructed are quite

noteworthy. As the industrial-capitalist system developed, old forms of life and patterns of self-understanding experienced radical reconstruction. Such reconstruction is seen in the form of identity politics around the world, demands for group respect and recognition, which has emerged as new social movements that argue for the rights of women, religious minorities, diverse ethnic and racial groups, and gays and lesbians. Such movements cannot be explained away as a simple quest for material gain or tangible benefits, and they seem to call for an explanation that incorporates the notion of identity. Thus, any discussion of identity in the modern world must embrace the implications of its social construction, instability and ambiguity[7]. Notions of human identity and political-cultural identity are taken to be both intellectually elusive and routinely bound up in social-theoretical analysis.

It is interesting to note the way in which political science, sociology, cultural analysis, neoclassical economics approach the notion of identity. Sociology, in recent years has seen debates on individual identity and the constraints of social structure in the writings of Giddens (1991), Jenkins (1996), Stryker (1980). Anthropology, as seen in the works of Barth (1969), Cohen (1986) is more concerned with the cultural expression of identity, its meanings, and how it is maintained at group boundaries. Social psychologists such as Gergen (1971); Hogg, Terry, & White (1995); Markus (1977) have focused on the multifaceted and conditional nature of individual identity. Tajfel (1981); Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell (1987) argue social identity as a powerful ingredient in the development of in-group bias and intergroup conflict. The social identity theory reflected in the thinking of Henri Tajfel and John Turner is a promising approach for political psychologists in order to examine the emergence of strong social and political identities and their political impact. Social identity theory has spawned an enormous number of studies in a diverse group of countries. It addresses issues of intergroup conflict, conformity to group norms, the effects of low group status and the conditions under which it generates collective action, and the factors that promote the categorisation of oneself and others into groups. Questions of national identity, patriotism, and multiculturalism are among the various strands of research in political psychology that

[7] Preston (1997) gives a rich account of the development of the concept of identity and the necessity to consider it as an ambiguous concept.

has incorporated the notion of identity. However, social identity researchers have tended to ignore the subjective aspect of identities, paying considerable attention to the existence of simple group boundaries while ignoring their internal meaning. In another instance, strong identities have been found to undercut national unity and promote intolerance and intergroup antipathies. Also, not everyone identifies strongly with their ethnic or racial group affiliations. In social anthropology, it was 'ethnic identity' or 'ethnicity' which was used initially to discuss identity and the problematic usage of the concept was neither discussed nor questioned.

A discussion on identity requires an investigation into how actors see themselves and others, how they take on a particular role and conform to its norms, thereby creating a 'self' for themselves. In this regard identities have explicitly grabbed the interest of the social constructivist and the postmodernists. Deriving from the theories of William Issac Thomas, Peter Berger, Erving Goffman, Howard Becker, and others, the social constructionist approach to identity rejects any category that sets forward essential traits as the unique property of a collective's members[8]. Every individual or collective is 'molded, refabricated, and mobilized in accord with reigning cultural scripts and centers of power'(Cerulo 1997, p.387). National identity is one aspect which has attracted multifaceted literature from social constructionists. Benedict Anderson's (1991) work on nationalism can be cited as one elaborations of constructionism where national identity is argued to be a socio-cognitive construction brought about by cultural and social factors in a particular historical moment, effectively remaking collective images of the national self. Smith (1991) challenges the constructionist idea and adopts a middle-ground approach to national identity, linking social constructionism to more essentialist views. For him, national identity develops as a result of both 'natural' continuity and conscious manipulation. Natural continuity emerges from pre-existing ethnic identity and community; conscious manipulation is achieved via commemoration, ideology, and symbolism. He compliments this duality with a social psychological dimension, citing a 'need for community' as integral to identity work. In Smith's view, this tri-part combination distinguishes national identity, making it the most fundamental and

[8] Refer to Cerulo (1997).

inclusive of collective identities. The construction of national identity will be dealt with in greater detail in the latter part of this chapter.

While supporting the anti-essentialism that drives constructionist inquiries on identity, postmodernists points out that constructionist approach suffers from serious flaws of emphasising on only the identity construction process and that identity categories are build through interactive effort. In the study of identity, they take into consideration the variation within identity categories. Postmodern writings of Butler (1990, 1993) have challenged traditional conceptions of identity by arguing for a more flexible identity which is fluid, contingent and socially constructed.

The discipline of Sociology has always been fascinated by the idea of collective identity as is evident in Durkheim's (1893) 'collective conscience', Marx's 'class consciousness' (Elster 1999), Weber's 'Verstehen' (Elwell 2009), and Tonnies's (1957) Gemeinschaft. While Marx and Durkheim favoured structural explanation, Weber was for agent explanations. However, it was the work of Cooley and Mead[9] that introduced 'identity' as a concept of study in the sociological framework, and identity studies have evolved and grown central to current sociological discourse. Along with the relationship of individual and collectivity, sociologists have been focusing and exploring the ways in which interpersonal interactions mold an individual's sense of self.

Sokefeld (2001) mentions about Philip Gleason's (1983) exploration of the rise of identity in American academic discourse until the 1980s and especially the pioneering work of Erik H. Erikson (1968a). Sokefeld (2001, p.531) observes that identity which was already a subject of study in social psychology, was only later picked up by social anthropologists. Erik H. Erikson's work (1968a) was a very important source for the popularisation of identity in academic discourse. According to Erikson (ibid., p.102), '[t]he term identity expresses such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential characteristics with others'.

Erving Goffman's (1963) 'Stigma' marks the entrance of 'identity' into social science discourse where Goffman uses the term 'identity' to replace the term 'self' that

[9] Refer to Cerulo (1997, p.385).

he had used in his earlier writings[10]. He uses the term 'identity' in the sense of the collection of characteristics that is used to categorise persons that includes both others and ourselves. Here too, identity expresses a relation of sameness, sameness with a collection of attributes. Corresponding to Erikson's (1968a) conception that individual identity implies self-knowledge and a successful and accepted synthesis of diverse influences, especially those of the individual's family, Taylor (1989) states that identity defines the moral outlook of each individual, in the sense that individuals are able to determine what is important to them. Taylor insists that self-affirmation and recognition by a significant other are the two conditions for achieving a successful identity.

According to Cerulo (1997, p.386), identity research of the past two decades seems to be standing in opposition to traditional concerns. This shift has taken place due to the trends of social and nationalist movements of the past three decades, intellectual concerns with agency and self-direction and new communication technologies.

Reflexive scientific discourse has pointed towards reifications like 'cultures', 'traditions', etc. as social constructions and frequently other concepts have been employed in order to escape the danger of reification. Identity certainly has become one of such replacing concepts. Just as 'cultures' get constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed as people pursue their identities, identity too forms as well as gets dissected. Thus, identity which is a much broader concept and has multiple meanings within it must not be taken for granted but has to be explained in the same ways as those other concepts which are today employed with considerable reservation only. Identity, just like culture or tradition, is not simply a fact but a construct. Although identity is not a universal concept, it has no doubt become a globalised concept, found not only in the different corners of the world but also in diverse kinds of discourses.

The discussion on the emergence of identity as a subject of study and growing demands of the recognition of its various forms have popularised the term 'identity politics' which has gained acceptance as a phrase and appears prominently as a topic of discussion in seminars and disciplines related to social change and movements as well as in many journals related to anthropology, sociology, political science, political

[10] Goffman writes about the 'self' in his book 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' (1959).

psychology[11]. Just like the term 'identity', this phrase too raises spirited debate in the academia, mass media, and in politics and policy. One of the reason for the disagreement associated with the term is due to its wide use throughout the social sciences to describe phenomena as diverse as multiculturalism, the women's movement, civil rights, lesbian and gay movements, separatist movements in Canada and Spain, and violent ethnic and nationalist conflict in postcolonial Africa and Asia, as well as in the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe. Bernstein (2005, pp.47-48) traces the use of the term identity politics in academic writings:

> *'In 1979, Anspach first used the term identity politics to refer to activism by people with disabilities to transform both self- and societal conceptions of people with disabilities. Over the next decade, only three scholarly journal articles employed the term identity politics in their abstracts, to describe (a) ethnicity as a contemporary form of politics (Ross 1982); (b) a form of critical pedagogy that links social structure with the insights of poststructuralism regarding the nature of subjectivity, while incorporating a Marxist commitment to politics (Bromley 1989); and (c) general efforts by status-based movements to foster and explore the cultural identity of members (Connolly1990). By the mid-1990s, references to identity politics as violent ethnic conflict (Meznaric 1993), and nationalism more generally (Alund 1995) emerged. In addition to using the term identity politics to describe any mobilization related to politics, culture, and identity, scholarly analyses have often elided normative political evaluations of identity politics as a political practice with sociological analyses of the relationship between identity and politics'*[12].

Beneath the normative political claims about identity politics there are competing theoretical ways to understand the relationship between experience, culture, identity, politics, and power.

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[11] Annual Review of Anthropology, Political psychology, Annual Review of Sociology, Journal of law and Society, Acta Sociologica, Anthropos.

[12]Bernstein mentions from J.A Ross (1982) Urban Development and the Politics of Ethnicity: A Conceptual Approach. Ethn. Racial Stud. 5(4):440-56; C. Connolly (1990) Splintered Sisterhood: Antiracism in a Young Women's Project. Ferninist Review, 36(Autumn):52-64; H. Bromley (1989) Identity Politics and Critical Pedagogy. Educ. Theory 39(3):207-23; A. Alund (1995) Alterity in Modernity. Acta Sociol. 38(4):311-22; S. Meznaric (1993) The Rapists' Progress: Ethnicity, Gender and Violence. Rev. Sociol. 24(3-4): 119-29.

Identity Politics

Identity politics came into being in the mid1960s and inspired a series of new social movements based on the politics of gender, sexuality, and ethnic or racial factors. Critics assert that identity politics emerges from a moment of social and intellectual crisis. Social movements based on identity, in turn, are accused of narcissism. Identity, for psychologist Erik Erikson (1968b), is associated with a crisis that occurs during the passage from youth to adulthood. It takes place during the transition between stages in the life cycle and is a stage of human development. However Rosaldo[13] argues that identity politics is quite different from such crisis stage although it too seeks an answer to one's membership and aspirations. According to him, '[i]dentity politics is neither about the isolated, narcissistic individual nor about the person in passage between childhood and adulthood' (p. 119).

Identity politics is more concerned with participation in new social movements. The argument that identity politics is monolithic and divisive that divides the working class, social movements, or the nation state is based on the nostalgia for the 1950s which was thought to be a period of national unity that has come under threat now by the new social movements of women, homosexuals, people of colour. The unity of that era is however more of a myth based on the exclusion of those who now are part of the new social movement.

Identities are not fixed and in a globalised world, collective identities are as flexible as the personal identity. One such notion of identity that requires continuous revisiting is nation. Probably there are very few people today that would claim not to belong to a nation and not to have a nationality. Yet, nation, state and nationalism remain poorly defined concepts. Considered to be of historically western origin, developed in the late 18th and early 19th century, the discourse of the nation has grown constantly and spread all over the globe. Based on revolutionary and romanticised ideas, the discourse of the nation, since the time of its origin is intrinsically connected with issues of power and rights. The notion of national self-determination, sovereignty is inseparable from the idea

[13] Alcoff, Linda Martin; Michael Hames-Garcia; Satya P. Mohanty and Paula M.L. Moya (eds.) (2006).

of the nation. European nationalists in the 19th century as well as non-European anticolonial nationalists in the 20th century as politically involved individuals and movements took to the discourse of the nation in order to demand rights and power. Contrary to the belief that group identity is based on certain psychological or sociological categories, sometimes certain communal identity is also asserted because of issues of power and resistance which are today intrinsically connected with identity. To insist on an identity is also to insist on certain rights and to be denied an identity implicates a denial of rights. Recognitions is one of the demands in the claims of most sub-national identity.

> *'Immigrants demand the right to "protect" or "preserve" their identity which may include demands for school instruction in, among other things, their mother tongue and religion. People may of course also claim a separate national identity, implicating the necessity of a more general autonomy or even political independence'.* (Sokefeld 2001, p.534)

The recognition that identity is a matter of claims, rights and power has resulted in the replacement of a simple concept of identity, in many cases, by the notion of politics of identity. To argue that the concept 'identity' may not be applied to others because they lack certain definitional characteristics presupposed by that application is to miss the political contents and intention of the concept and its character as a project.

The classical European tradition of social theory concerned itself with analysing the shift to the modern world which was seen as a mix of system change and agent response. Smith, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber all had contributed to political identity. In the historical shift to the modern world, political identity, institutionally secured order and legitimacy came to revolve around nationhood, statehood and citizenship. It is clear that identity is socially constructed, carried in language, expressed in mundane routine, liable to revision and routinely contested as we move through life. Political-cultural identity expresses the way in which private self-understandings are expressed within the public sphere. A political identity will express a balance between private concerns and public demands. Approaches to the issue of identity and political-cultural identity generated by the classical European tradition, has typically taken the form of discussions of nationalism.

It is within the framework of the broad modernist project and the structures given by states that modern political-cultural identities develop and the rise of states and the related derivative construction of nations gets discussed. With regard to this, Preston (1997, p.33) brings attention to three elements which are 'the idea of the state which is a politico-legal entity,….the nation which is or is taken to be a community of people sharing in some important way a common culture; and.....the nation-state which is a nation organised as a state'.

The concept of nation-state as a historically deep-rooted, culturally homogeneous entity is misleading as for 'a group to come together and formulate, lodge and secure acceptance of claims to nation-statehood is a complex task' (ibid.). However, while considering 'nation' as an idea, it is the notion of political-cultural identity that is focused upon rather than the general notion of identity. The social scientific traditions that developed during the twentieth century offer a series of ways of looking at the ideas of identity followed by political-cultural identity. In the sphere of political-cultural identity, the contestedness of identity is centrally important.

The idea of identity politics has also been a grounding assumption of the new identity-based scholarly programs that have developed and grown in almost all universities and colleges since the 1960s[14]. Despite the success of identity-based movements, it has received criticisms in both the political and the academic realms. It has been attacked by the reactionaries who opposed the goals of left progressive social movements and the purpose of identity-based scholarship. Critics also include some former supporters who have become concerned about an overemphasis on difference and identity at the expense of unity. Political critics of identity politics claim that it fractures coalitions and breeds distrust of those outside one's group. Theoretical critics of identity politics claim that identities are social constructions rather than natural kinds, that they are indelibly marked by the oppressive conditions that create them in the first place, and therefore should not be given so much weight or importance. Arguments are used to

[14] Refer to "Reconsidering Identity politics: An Introduction" by Linda Martin and Satya P. Mohanty in Linda Martin Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M.L. Moya (eds.) (2006) Identity Politics Reconsidered.

suggest that identities are ideological fictions, imposed from above, and used to divide and control populations.

The idea of political-cultural identity can be regarded as an answer to the wider question of the relationship of individual and collectivity. How private identity is expressed within the public world, thereafter how such an identity is acquired and how it changes and at what costs. In the person-centered understandings or the notion of locale, the focus is on how an individual construes their relationship to the community they inhabit and how thereafter the person considers that their community relates to the wider world. It involves the political understandings of individuals and of local collectivities expressed in folk knowledge or ideologies. Notion of network looks at the way individuals lodge themselves in dispersed groups, and thereafter how these groups construe their relationship to other groups within the wider collectivity. This seems to be a matter of membership of groups or organisations or subcultures. Notion of memory looks at the ways in which the individuals, groups and collectivities secure their understandings of the power aspects of pattern of social relationships. In the European tradition this has routinely involved the invocation of an 'other' against which the group is thereby defined, and nation can be looked at as an example of it.

The rediscovery of ethnic identity can be looked at as a transmodern development, an age characterised by concrete cultural identities that are rooted in long standing traditions and customs. Post-modern ideology sees the economy as the foundation of the human condition, and differences or cultural specifities as minor and bizarre deviations from a global social 'normality'. In fact, however, it is cultural differences and specificities that constitute the most powerful obstacle to the diffusion of this universalistic and economistic ideology, and to the transformation of the world in its image. Cultural specificity, it is argued, is ethnic in character and should be approached in the context of an organised opposition to universal standardisation. Here the anthropological and biological components of ethnicity are secondary in their importance for social interactions to the sense of ethnic belonging generated by a specific system of cultural production, cemented usually by a common language and/or religion, among the members of the ethnic group.

What is important about the ethnic dimension within the context of the contemporary global society is its ability to provide a source of identity. This mechanism of identification is based primarily on cultural and linguistic belonging and only secondly on the quasi-biological notions of a 'blood community'. Ethnic belonging can be seen as the ultimate form of generalised interpersonal solidarity and the epitome of the communitarian and organic 'Gemeinschaft' described by Tonnies (1957). Primary belonging and a sense of birthplace are brought into play against the threat of the engulfing mass culture. Ethnic identity offers individuals and groups considerable certainty in an uncertain world. When the territorial dimension is added to ethnicity they together constitute the sense of identity, place, and belonging. The sense of belonging and recognition of the same by the 'others' is one dimension of identity politics.

Theory of Recognition

Political theories of recognition, particularly those formulated by Charles Taylor (1994), Nancy Fraser (2003) and Axel Honneth (1995, 2003) focus on the role played by recognition in individual identity formation and the normative foundation this can provide to theories of justice. In the 1990s, studies of political movements centered upon concepts such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and culture led to the development of theories of political recognition.

Social and political notions of recognition deal with the dialogical understanding of the individual. In this strand, identity is seen as a product of one's relations to others, and feelings of self-worth, self-respect and self-esteem are possible only when an individual is positively recognised for who he/she is. According to Taylor (1994), recognition is an indispensible means of understanding and justifying the demands of the identity movements taking place from the 1960s onwards. The theory of recognition is a means to understand and justify both historical and contemporary political struggles. The specific importance of recognition lies in its relationship to identity, which helps individuals in understanding who they are. Identity, if is a consequence of recognition or its absence, then conforms to the Hegelian belief that individuals are formed intersubjectively. Individual identity is not constructed from within and generated by the individuals alone. Rather, it is through dialogue with others that identity gets negotiated.

This idea that identity gets determined through the interaction with others initiates a shift from a monologic to a dialogic model of the self. The same argument is voiced by Axel Honneth (1995), who in agreement with Taylor (1994) states that recognition is essential to self-realisation. For him, it is the denial of recognition that provides the motivational and justificatory basis for social struggles. A different theory of recognition is propounded by Nancy Fraser[15] whose overarching theme throughout her works on recognition is the dissolving of the assumed antithesis between redistribution and recognition. Fraser believes that this binary opposition derives from the fact that, whereas recognition seems to promote differentiation, redistribution supposedly works to eliminate it. The recognition paradigm seems to target cultural injustice, which is rooted in the way individual's identities are positively or negatively valued. Individuals exist as members of a community based upon a shared horizon of meanings, norms and values. Conversely, the distribution paradigm targets economic injustice, which is rooted in one's relation to the market or the means of production. According to Fraser, both these forms of injustice are primary and co-original, meaning that economic inequality cannot be reduced to cultural misrecognition, and vice-versa. Many social movements face this dilemma of having to balance the demand for economic equality with the insistence that their cultural specificity be met.

According to Heidegren (2004), Adam Smith can be read as a point of departure in the theme of recognition within intellectual history and it was Smith's idea which was later picked up and further developed by Charles H. Cooley and George Herbert Mead. Smith emphasised on the importance of the other, how individuals come to see themselves in relation to others. Hegel departs from this point and distinguishes between different basic modes of recognition and suggests a multidimensional struggle for recognition. Building on Hegel, but also narrowing his scope, the young Marx stressed the importance of recognition in the labour process, and gave the name 'alienation' to the experience of disrespect in work. Among the classical sociologists, Durkheim's insistence on a pre-contractual solidarity points to the importance of mutual recognition as a basic medium of social integration. Today the concept of recognition has advanced into a key concept within the broad field of moral, social and political theory. 'The

[15] Refer to Andy (2004) available on: http://home.mira.net/~andy/works/fraser-review.htm .

politics of recognition', discussed by Charles Taylor (1994), and 'the struggle for recognition', discussed by Axel Honneth (1995) have been mainly responsible for this upsurge in interest. The first-mentioned theme relates to the question of multiculturalism, and the claims raised by different minority groups in society, that their particular cultural identity, i.e. value commitments, to be recognised by the majority society. The second theme relates to morally motivated social conflicts, i.e. social struggles for recognition that are triggered off by experiences of injury and disrespect in various forms.

Political theories of recognition can be read alongside the rise of multiculturalism in spite of them having important differences between them, which have produced an array of literature focused on recognising, accommodating and respecting difference. The politics of multiculturalism is rooted in the identity politics that tends to emphasise the distinctness and value of different cultural identity and demand group-specific rights to protect this uniqueness.

Identity Assertion

Identity is viewed as an idea or discourse by social constructivists who focus on determining the elements that contribute to the construction of a particular identity. They include explorations of the circumstances under which identities develop, the changes they undergo over time, and the social and political objectives for which identities may be created. A need for belonging, a concern about survival, and a need for a sense of worth or value are fulfilled by group membership and during the 20th century it was the nation that most often satisfied these demands[16]. In nearly all instances people display or express some level of national affinity. Building on the ideas discussed by Gellner (1983), Anderson (1991), Smith (1971, 1991), and Hobsbawm (1992), an abundance of theoretical speculations have developed that looks into the emergence, occurrence, and reproduction of ethnicity and nationalism. 'Nationalism' has large followers in the academic climate and the study of ethnic and national identity has provided the scholars with a fertile ground.

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[16] See Mack, J. E. (1983). Nationalism and the Self. Psychohistory Review, 11 (2-3), 47-69.

In order to satisfy the need to associate themselves to a collective and to avoid solitary existence, individuals seek for inclusion in groups. They seek to be a part of family, village, ethnic communities, nations by which they may fulfil their desire for involvement, affiliation, and inclusion. In addition to belonging, group participation also provides with personal survival, security, and safety. Early socialisation determines group adherence and individuals as members in various collectives begin to draw distinctions between those within the group ('us') and those outside ('them'). Anxiety and latent fears about the intentions of 'outsiders', is one of the reasons for individuals to embrace the collective as a protection from perceived threats. Along with it, the unending quest for internal pride and self-respect is dependent on group contact and association with a community. This ego gratification may be satisfied when actions by groups, such as the nation, are captured and personalised by individuals. A national victory may result in intimate emotions of pride, glory, honor, and heroism, whereas defeats may lead to personal dejection, helplessness, and depression. In times of turmoil, threat, or disruption of traditional ties, symbolic commitment to the nation may flourish as a means of reducing anxiety while maintaining identity and group cohesiveness.

Categories of 'primordial' identities such as 'indigenes', 'non-indigenes', 'migrants', and 'settlers' have come to gain wide currency and greater political significance in contestations over citizenship. The origin of these categories have ethnic, communal, religious and regional dimensions, and have evolved from an entrenched system of discriminatory practices in which non-indigenes, migrants and settlers are discriminated against and denied equal access to the resources, rights and privileges of a locality, community, town or state. Such discriminations is rather unfortunate as these categories of people are the original inhabitants and thus should have exclusionary access to the resources. The hierarchical, unequal, and ranked system of citizenship produced by the system at work often provokes conflicts, and goes to the very heart of the 'National Question'. These identities have deep historical roots in pre-colonial patterns of inter-group relations, and the discriminatory practices and ethnic inequalities entrenched by both the colonial regime and continued by post-independence administrations. These have together provoked various forms of self-determination agitation by different groups. However, it would be wrong to assume that the presence of heterogeneity is a sufficient

condition for a group to assert its identity and rise of conflicts. It is necessary to look at the circumstances under which particular identities and not others become salient. In other words, the fact that a country has several ethnic or religious groups does not make conflicts inevitable. It is only when identities are mobilised and politicised that they constitute the bases for conflicts. Often such conflicts tend to be violent because they involve territorial claims in a context of cultural and historical legacies and the competition for resources along with the failure of the state in managing inter-ethnic relations. Bringing in the attention towards the identity dimension of social movements, Langlois (2001, p.1) points out three main objectives of identity movements.

> *'First, they denounce injustice toward minorities. Second, they convey the idea that specific cultures must be taken into consideration when public policies are elaborated so that they meet the specific needs of minorities. Third, they demand greater control of their institutions – a demand that sometimes goes as far as self-government*'.

Identity movements fight for the interests, values of groups of individuals or communities defined by characteristics of race, ethnicity, sex, language, sexual orientation, religion, mythical origins and ancestral territory. The members of identity movements promote their own interests based on their way of seeing things and their personal knowledge and values. The shared values of the members of a group or community play a central role in emerging identity movements. Identity movement demands the search for symbolic recognition by a significant other and the defense of interests and promotion of rights of certain group who feel discriminated against[17]. Collective identities are constructed to promote the interest of the group which is then asserted. Search for recognition involving negotiation and sometimes struggle is probably the main feature of identity movements. One of the main problems that nations today face is the recognition of various nations within their own territory. The theory of recognition has gained prominence with the coming of the identity struggles. Relationship with the other is the issue behind identity assertion. In order to create a specific 'us' collectives create distinctions, establish hierarchies, and renegotiate rules of inclusion. Individuals and groups use art objects, commodities and symbols or clothing to articulate and project

[17] Langlois (2001).

identities. Sometimes culture is constructed by reviving historical cultural practices which define the boundaries of collective identity and reinvent ethnic identities. Identities are also constructed to resist assimilation and fear of marginalization. It was done in the case of creating a separate Tai-Ahom identity within the Assamese community and forms the subject of discussion in the succeeding chapters.

Collective identity and the political movements it spurs constitute an important concern for identity scholars. Identity politics and new social movements suggest a special form of agency- a self-conscious 'collective agency'. Identities emerge and movements ensue because collectives consciously coordinate action; group members consciously develop offenses and defenses, consciously insulate, differentiate, and mark, cooperate and compete, persuade and coerce. In such a context, agency encompasses more than the control and transformation of one's social environment. Attention to collectives and the establishment of their identities have re-energized scholarly interests in the identification process itself. Colonialism was the single most important factor in the crystallisation of contemporary identities and identity conflicts in many new nations that formed in the post-colonisation period. By bringing in different communities and sometimes even independent kingdoms into a culturally artificial political entity for instance, the British (as well as other imperialists) stimulated inter-group competition and mobilization for power and resources in the new state, thereby fostering ethnic conflicts. Such conflicts became prominent when there was no 'outsider' to fight against thus disrupting the myth of a united nation.

The concept of identity has often been criticised for its overuse in academic as well as non-academic discourses. While its usefulness as a concept in cross-cultural context has come under questioning, another argument suggests for the replacement of the concept by a range of other, more specific concepts. 'Identity' today needs to be employed with much more caution and proper definition of the term. Here, identity denotes belongingness- a shared sameness and the phrase 'identity politics' will refer to a quest for recognition for a particular location within society, and rejection of universal categories that tend to subsume, erase, or suppress this particularity.

As has already been mentioned the development of a national identity is one aspect of creating a social identity. The inhabitants are supposed to share belongingness and adhere to the unity of the nation. However, nations that exist at present are not homogeneous in most cases. The recognition of the internal diversity and the relationship with the other, which is at the heart of identity assertion, is an internal problem in most countries which brings us to the next section where the concepts of nation, state and nationalism will be discussed.

Nation, State and Nationalism

Today, the nation, the state and nationalism have become the focus of political allegiance and political identity. Nation is a very intriguing concept that has been able to capture human fascination for a long time. The origin of the term 'nation' can be traced to the Latin word 'natio', meaning a social grouping based on real or fancied community of birth or race (Rejai and Enloe 1969, p.141). The theories to understand nation developed so far can be categorized on the basis of the importance they place on primordial ties, history, construction or evolution.

According to the primordialist argument, the nation is rooted in kinship ties and ethnicity. As against this, the perennialists claim that nations have been a constant feature of human history, where humans have always been aligned in national communities. It presupposes the ability of nationalists to generate a form of communal identity and to be able to clearly differentiate one nation from another. The modernists argue that the nation is a political project coterminous with the development of the modern state, born out of the processes of modernity. As society changes to industrial, capitalist mode, the economic and political elites construct the artificial social bonds necessary to instill a sense of national purpose and unity through the construction of particular historical narratives. Ethno-symbolists try to synthesise the arguments of the cultural primordialists and the modernists, claiming that although most nations are modern constructs, the people who come together to form a nation share a common belongingness in the form of ethnic communities. The post-modernist argument is for a constructivist mode of theorizing that support the modernist debate on nation[18]. In all of these theories on nation,

[18] Refer to Smith (2000).

the construction of stories about identity, origins, history and community is crucial. Through these, a national identity is brought about which is, at large, a sense of unity with others belonging to the same nation.

While discussing the Marxist idea on nation, it is worth mentioning Lowy[19] according to whom although Marx does not offer any systematic theory of the national question, or precise definition of the concept of a 'nation', he is of the view that the bourgeoisie tend to foster national antagonisms and tends to increase them. For Marx capital and economy are linked with nation and the struggle to control markets creates conflicts between the capitalist powers; the exploitation of one nation by another produces national hostility; chauvinism is one of the ideological tools which enables the bourgeoisie to maintain its domination over the proletariat. He blames the world market for destroying industry's national base and creating the universal interdependence of nations. Lowy mentions that the 'radical left' current was represented by Luxemburg, Pannekoek, Trotsky and Strasser which opposed national separatism, in the name of the principle of proletarian internationalism. According to the Marxist argument nations donot exist as a uniform and homogenous category as each class in the nation has conflicting interests and rights. Lenin gives a coherent, revolutionary strategy for the workers' movement, based on the fundamental slogan of national self-determination. Stalin, on the other hand brings forth the characteristics of common language, territory, economic life that are necessary to be present together to form a nation.

During the 17th and 18th centuries the term 'nation' was expanded to include variables such as territory, culture, language, and history although a nation hardly possesses all of these criteria together (Rejai and Enloe 1969, p.141). Rejai and Enloe (ibid.) put forth a workable definition of the term 'nation' as 'a relatively large group of people who feel that they belong together by virtue of sharing one or more such traits as common language, religion or race, common history or tradition, common set of customs, and common destiny'. However, none of these are adequate to be the sole cause of the

[19] 'Marxist and the National Question' available in: http://www.solidarity-us.org/pdfs/cadreschool/fws.lowy.pdf .

formation of a nation[20]. Another prominent idea[21] about nation is that it is a large-scale solidarity constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future.

'Nations' for Renon (1882) are new development in history brought about by 'a series of convergent facts'. People unite only if there is a will to do so. But what determines this interest is another question. Nation is based on the national feeling. It is a spiritual family, has a sentiment associated with it. It is constituted of a past and a present. People, in possession of a rich legacy of memories and a will to live together make up a nation. The conditions necessary for bringing the people together includes 'common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more' (ibid, p.8). A nation thus is a large-scale solidarity, with the idea of patriotism and sacrifice inherent in it. It is constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. As long as its inhabitants are loyal to it and are ready for any sacrifice for its sake, a nation will exist. However, what builds a nation, i.e. the will, can also lead to its disintegration and new nations can form within an old one too. A nation then basically is an 'imagination' and as put forth by Anderson (1991, p.6), it is 'an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'. 'Nation' for Hobsbawm (1992, pp.18-19) is one that has a primarily political meaning which represents 'the body of citizens whose collective sovereignty constituted them a state which was their political expression'. Citizenship and mass participation are integral to it. He thus links nation with the expression of state (territory) and people. A people to be called a nation requires to have a 'historic association with a current state or one with a fairly lengthy and recent past[,]….existence of a long established cultural elite, possessing a written national literary and administrative vernacular[,]….a proven capacity for conquest' (ibid., pp.37-38). T.K. Ommen (1994) too points out that territory

[20] Ernst Renon (1882) argues in "What is nation?" that formation of a nation depends on common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more-these are the essential conditions for being a people. It entails an element of myth. Similar argument is found in the writings of Rejai and Enloe (1969) that the important point in the formation of a nation is the belief among its people that they share common traits.

[21] Refer to Renan (1882).

is one of the criterion for the formation of a nation, the other being common language. The territory is one on which the inhabitants have a moral claim by virtue of it being their original homeland or because they come to identify with it as their homeland as migrants, colonizers or even conquerors. The common instrument of communication, i.e. language should be able to help the members carry on with the business of everyday life. Nation, thus, involves a population possessing a territory, shared myths and historical memories, common rights and duties for all members.

The question that is often debated is what determines the will of the people to come together and form a nation. Fox (2003), under the influence of Johann Gottfried von Herder argues in favour of language as a possibility for the people to identify with concrete political arrangements as it is more concrete and tangible. Sociolinguistics too notes the link between language and nationality. Herder had conceived of humanity as made up of a series of cultures each consisting of a group or a 'folk' (Volk) with its own tradition, custom, literature, music, language, and even 'soul' (Volksgeist). He expounded cultural nationalism where each culture represented natural and organic growth. Herder linked the history and nature of nation-building with a vision of linguistic revelation through one's Volk. His philosophy of language points towards a rethinking of the nature and meaning of a linguistically constituted people, or Volk. Herder's work further suggests that Volkes are best understood as groups of people identifiable through a particular linguistic context: namely, the ongoing activity of expression. Nations, on the other hand, may be seen as products of the expressed linguistic content which historically and naturally develops within and through each particular group. Thus Herder presents a different way of understanding affective attachment, one which assumes a relationship between two ideal communities. Both Volk and nation may be thus understood as aspects of a process in which language becomes the binding force. Fox explains in greater detail Herder's vision of the organic development of peoples and their language, and the implications of his arguments for thinking about national feeling. People become aware of themselves by the use of the language which is the initial step in making connections across space. By constructing a sense of 'publicness', language brings the affective feelings of identity with the Volkin to national life. Fox, however states that Herder's romantic vision of linguistic and communal revelation is rarely taken seriously as his

organic perspective runs counter to the whole modern preference for choice over belonging.

Herder's argument that nations are language groups and therefore nationalism is a linguistic movement is successfully counter-questioned and refuted by Smith[22]. Language is seen as only one of many cultural attachments by another aspect of nationality and language theory while theorising about the nature of national communities and identities. However, identity developed on the basis of language cannot be denied. Rise of such identities have become a major issue in India, which will be discussed in details in the next chapter.

National sentiment and presence of a state are seen as a cyclical process. A state exists because of the national sentiment and the people are expected to have the feeling of unity and loyalty toward the state they are part of. Sometimes, a state sustains through nation-building. It is carried out as a political and historical project. At times, a nation gets transformed into a state and both overlaps.

According to Hobsbawm (1992, p.80) the state 'rule[s] over a territorially defined 'people' and did so as the supreme 'national' agency of rule over its territory, its agents increasingly reaching down to the humblest inhabitant of the least of its villages'. It is more to do with sovereignty and surveillance. The state takes upon itself the task of reinforcing state patriotism and spreading the image and heritage of the nation. Territorial integrity and the right to surveillance of the state over its people are echoed even in Weber's (1946, p.78) celebrated definition of state as 'a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'. The state has to be defined in terms of its means, 'the use of physical force'. A state carries out a relation of domination and Weber[23] points out three legitimations of dominations: traditional, charismatic and legal. Legal domination, exercised by the modern 'servant of the state' is based on 'the validity of legal structure and functional 'competence' based on rationally created *rules.*' (ibid., p.79) A state is institutionalised through sets of autonomous, public

[22] Smith (1971) argues that language groups are ambiguous and people belonging to two different states may possess the same language. Even people speaking a common language in a state may not concede to form a nation. pp. 182-183.

[23] According to Weber, traditional, charismatic and legal are the three "pure" types of the legitimation of the obedience to the state.

institutions such as police force, armies, political institutions with a legitimate monopoly of coercion and extraction in a given territory, and sovereignty in relation to those outside its borders.

The inner justifications are essential to carry out the domination. For an uninterrupted organised domination, the people have to accept the claims of the masters who are the bearers of power. Legitimacy is derived from the will of the people. Renon (1882) too had pointed out the importance of the will of the people for the formation and sustenance of a nation. In the modern states this will is often maintained by force. The glorious past of a nation is a creation and sometimes exaggerated to create the myth of a nation. History is crucial in it as a nation is formed in the process of forgetting and remembering. In a legal rationality, the impersonal state becomes the supreme authority and the peoples' loyalty is directed towards it. The nation that was initially created by will need to be maintained at all cost and the state transforms into a 'brute force'. The modern state thus exists in the everyday life by regulating law and order. So, as Weber (1946) says, the legitimacy of the use of force becomes a very crucial aspect of the existence of state.

While existence of a nation requires the sentiment and will of the people, the State on the other hand as an institution exercises power over the people within a territory and claim monopoly on that power. The Nation is an idea, a myth, whereas a state is a juridico-political entity. A State cannot survive without a nation and so it tries to bring about or create the nation through nation-building. Nation-building is a process, a means with nation as the end product. It is now clear that while nation is a psycho-cultural phenomenon state is a political-legal concept.

In most of the currently underdeveloped, newly independent countries authority and sovereignty have run ahead of self-conscious, national identity and cultural integration. What are found in Europe are nation-states, whereas Asia and Africa have state-nations (Rejai and Enloe, 1969). In a nation-state, the boundaries of the state are approximately coterminous with those of the nation making it socially cohesive as well as politically organised and independent. State-nation is a predominant feature of non-western world where the processes of cultural integration gain momentum under the

impetus of political unification. It was primarily because independence from the colonial power involved the demarcation of territorial boundaries and the subjection of a given people to a single government encouraging the adoption of a common administrative structure, a common educational system, a common body of law, a common language, and a common system of communications.

Both nation and state have the element of nationalism connected with it. A nation is legitimised by the principles of nationalism that aims for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation. Nationalism as an ideology and a social movement has been very much in evidence since the end of the 18th century. The idea of nationalism can be traced back to German romantics and enlightenment. The Turkish Political scientist, Ozkirimli (2000) observes that it was only in the 1920s and 1930s that nationalism became a topic of enquiry owing to the pioneering works of historians like Carleton Hayes, Hans Kohn, Louis Snyder, E.H. Carr. Till the First World War, studies on nationalism dealt mainly with questions of ethics and philosophy. After the Second World War, these studies took a turn to accommodate the process of decolonization and establishment of new states in the Third World and the post 1960 saw emergence of diversified debates. He suggests four stages in the study of nationalism (ibid., p.15):

- The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the idea of nationalism was born;
- 1918-45 when nationalism became a subject of academic inquiry;
- 1945 to the late 1980s when the debate became more diversified with the participation of sociologists and political scientists;
- From the late 1980s to the present when attempts to transcend the 'classical' debate were made.

Nationalism is an ideology, it is a political project and its history gets influenced by its ideology. Nationalist historiography thus becomes a political project too. Nationalism as an ideology refers to one's highest loyalty to the nation involving a belief in the intrinsic superiority of one's own nation over all other nations. Nationalism in case of a nation tends to be popularly based and cultivated upward to achieve certain goals. In a state, it tends to be officially sponsored, cultivated at the top, and filtered downward.

The relationship of nation and state is a relationship between national identity and political autonomy, between national integration and political sovereignty. Aloysius links nationalism to the aspiration of a class or group. He elucidates it by referring to nationalism as,

> *'...the doctrine or ideology of an aspiring class, or to the policy orientation of a state, or to a praiseworthy sentiment of attachment to one's own nation or state. Nationalism may also refer to a socio-political movement for state-formation or any anti-imperialist movement or to the nation-building activities or mobilization of a government or class'*. (Aloysius 1997, p. 10)

Whether as an ideology or movement, it can be used to refer to a state, group of ethnic community or single ethnic community. For Gellner (1983, p.1), nationalism is a

> *'political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent. Nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle. Nationalist sentiment is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist movement is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind'.*

'Nationalism' is an ideological movement for Smith (1971) that aims at self-government and independence on behalf of a group, that tries to constitute an actual or potential 'nation' like others. It corresponds to the definition adopted by the groups fighting for their recognition and against the state hegemony. The liberals and Marxists in their evolutionist view regarded nationalism as a progressive stage in the evolution of human societies that will wither away with the establishment of a peaceful international order. Kymlicka (1995) mentions the 19th century to be an age of nationalism as well as migration.

From the very beginning, nationalism was seen as a new type of conflict which put peoples against tyrants and despots, thus associating it with messianism, militarism, and war. More than often nationalism is seen as a phenomenon emerging under crisis situation that disappears with the restoration of 'normal conditions'. The collapse of the Soviet type of communism in 1989 is at times seen as the beginning of a new wave of nationalism. War and conquest by one nation intensified the need for national and political unity in other nations. The French Revolution spread the idea that the nation has a right and an identity of its own which got manifested into a state. With time the idea of a nation got merged with the authority of a state.

In the non-western world, the growth of nationalism can be attributed to the spread of Western ideas, techniques, and institution. Non-Western nationalism is an attempt to assimilate foreign values and practices into those of the colonial peoples calling themselves 'nations'. It initially rose as a protest movement. Nationalism in the underdeveloped world has a distinctive character of its own. While the former colonial rulers could more openly rely on coercive authority, the native rulers' claim of legitimacy was based on popular acceptance even though they too had the forces of coercion. However, the neglect of cultural homogeneity by the imperialist powers while drawing up state jurisdictions resulted in ethnic and tribal communalism challenging the newly developed state-nations to look for the integrating element that would bind the population. Therefore, with the transfer of power from the colonisers to the natives, the challenge was to find a popular identification that would keep the people united. In such a situation, nationalism was made the ingredient to vitalise and conserve the authority of the state. It is important to note here that a common language and territory, or a concrete nation is not the only pre-requisite for the growth of nationalism. Often it is a sense of deprivation, objective or subjective, that provided the prerequisite for the emergence of nationalism, the subjective consciousness a people develops about their common history, experience, and destiny.

A state preceded by nationalism is likely to have a relatively homogeneous citizenry. On the other hand, state-nations strive to include the heterogeneous communities into a homogenous frame, as is seen in the case of India, Indonesia, Vietnam, etc. India can be seen as an interesting case in this regard where the entire construction of the idea of 'India' points towards the political project of the nationalist leaders to initiate a process of homogenization, to create a 'singular India'. The next chapter will look into the formation of this India and rejection of the forced unity by numerous regions within the Indian nation.

Chapter- II

CONFRONTING INDIAN-NESS: NATIONS WITHIN A NATION

In the developing countries, the state preceded the nation. Taking into consideration the difference between nation-states and state-nations, India belongs to the category of state-nations. The problem with such state is to find the element that would keep the citizens united. Borrowing Ernst Renan's (1882) definition of a nation as a solidarity of people, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future, the continuance of a nation thus depends on a shared past and a will of the people for a united future. The problem lies in defining 'the will'. It can form as well as also lead to the disintegration of nation. Here 'Indian-ness' is used to refer to the Indian nation, the political mapping of the Indian state as well as the essence of nationalism entailed in this construction. In case of India it is interesting to note the demands of sovereignty put forth by communities and sometimes by an entire state existing within it. Such claims of separation and independence questions the entire idea of an Indian identity. There is a constant dilemma whether to accept or oppose the hegemonic idea of a homogenous India. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section is a discussion on the construction of the Indian identity and the inherent problems connecting it to regional nationalism. The second section will deal in details the politics of identity in Assam. Assam struggled against the homogenous Indian identity and created an Assamese identity to thwart the efforts of Indianisation. However, soon question on the authenticity of 'Assamese' came up and it now faces the threat of rejection from other communities residing within the state. If nationalism as an ideology entails element of myths, it has to be engraved in the minds of the people. But the question remains as to how far political boarders can keep a nation and its people together.

SECTION-I

Birth of the Indian Nation

Before the advent of the colonial rule, there didn't exist the idea of India as a nation-state which points out to it being a fairly new and modern construction. The idea of Indian nationalism came up when the people of the country had to look for a distinctive identity different from that of the colonizers that can be effectively used for rejecting colonial rule. But the post-independent Indian state appropriated the very colonial character that it had questioned and rejected during the freedom struggle. The state hence is seen as carrying out internal colonialism and discriminatory practices by still keeping the regions divided into core and periphery just as the colonisers had done to facilitate administration and occupation of the territory. Domination becomes an everyday activity of the state carried out through concepts like national security, development, modern science and technology which even gets legitimacy due to the accepted dominant theory of state as the institution having the monopoly to deploy violence over its subjects.

'People' forms the crucial part in defining a nation. The preamble of the Indian Constitution begins with 'We, the people…'[24], borrowed from the statement found originally in the Constitution of the United States. The 'the people' now has come to define a good, moral collectivity in all modern states. The question that needs attention is what is this 'we, the people'? Initially, 'people' did not include more than half of the population and were distinguished from the populace.[25] The populace did not have political rights. Those who had such rights were distinguished in terms of class, gender and age. The term 'people' later came to signify the citizens. Mann (2005) distinguishes it into groups of stratified and organic. When seen as stratified, the difference is respected. But if it is seen as organic, it leads to suppression of many groups in order to form the one larger group. He gives the example of north-western Europe of late 18th century, where religious homogeneity within each state shifted the focus to language. Unlike religion, one can speak more than one language, for instance by learning and

[24] Refer to http://indiacode.nic.in/coiweb/coifiles/preamble.htm.

[25] Michael Mann (2005) looks at the idea of "people" in the chapter titled "Two Versions of "We, The People"" in his book "The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing".

practicing the official language. However, encouraging the use of only one language led to dying out of minority ethnic cultures with the state playing its part in it.

Although Liberal democracies are said to be the protector of individual human rights, it is the rights and regulation of groups have actually been the concern of liberal democracy. India, a case of liberal democracy has very strong leanings to organic nationalism. In case of organic nationalism, democracy might turn into authoritarian statism. Minority communities can get excluded from full membership of a nation. Shubh Mathur (2008) lends support to this view when she argues that violence against minorities, whether it takes the form of 'riots' or of counter-insurgency operations by the state, is carried out with tacit public consent. Since 1952, different minority groups have been targeted by successive Indian governments in counter-insurgency operations using national laws aimed at 'protecting' the nation from its enemies.

By referring to the Gramscian concept of hegemony (Bates, p.1975), it can be observed that the national will created is actually a construction by the leading class. Their hegemony becomes the unifying force through persuasion, education, organization. Looking at India, this hegemonic ideas are quite prevalent, be in terms of language or religion. Homogenisation is a crucial part of nation-building where the nation is created by imposing a common culture, language upon its members.

In case of India, the nationalist movement brought about the new nation. It has but become a powerful state system with multiple communities asserting their nationalities. One can thus see the ambiguous nature of the term 'nationalism' which may have different meaning for different groups and individuals, in different space and time. As has already been mentioned, protest against imperialist powers was seen as nationalist movements. Such protests are the beginning of the formation of a nation in India. The present Indian state corresponds to a great extent to the pre-independent British Empire in India. The uprise against the British was a means to bring about the Indian nation as a new form of congruence of power and culture. Gellner' (1983) influences Aloysius's (1997) view that transition and social change is indicated in the modern phenomenon of the nation.

The nationalist political movement, under the leadership of the Congress became the legitimate representative of the nation engaged in the historic moment of bringing forth the nation. However, retaining a nation is a greater challenge than becoming a nation. When a people becomes a nation to fight the imperialist powers, they are united against a foreign power but the post independence stage turns out to be crucial as there no more exist a foreign 'other' to remind the natives of their distinctiveness. Here, the nation, or more appropriately those leading the nationalist movement looks for a state system in order to attain legitimate authority. Herein, begins the relationship between the leading class and the masses. The Gramscian concept of hegemony clearly states that the class that wants to create a national synthesis around its leadership tries to hegemonise the rest of the population in order to make its rule appear like a national-popular rule. It is carried out through persuasion, education, organisation. Looking at India, this hegemonic ideas are quite prevalent, be in terms of language or religion. Homogenisation is a crucial part of nation-building where the nation is created by imposing a common culture, language upon its members.

In support of Mathur's (2008) argument regarding culture being the central point of reference for power in the modern world and certain culture occupying the hegemonic position in nationalist constructs, India becomes a fine case of reference. In India, the demand to institute 'one nation-one language' theory led to the debate of national language. The special position accorded to Sanskrit reduces the whole of 'India' to one of its constitutive parts, namely, Sanskrit[26]. The part comes to stand for the whole through absorption of other parts that make up the whole. Sanskrit came to be seen as the uniting force to India's diversity. For some, it became a useful weapon to counter the growing threat of Hindi imperialism. In order to grant Sanskrit such a status also called for the nationalization of the language. The symbolic importance accorded to Sanskrit in independent India is evident in the Constitution recognizing the nation by its Sanskrit name, Bharata, and the Upanishadic saying, Satyam eva jayate, truth alone triumphs, being adopted as the national motto. The acceptance of Devanagari as the sole script in which Hindi, the official language of India, would be written and developed made the Arabic script, like its users, 'alien' and 'foreign' to India. Urdu as a language got

[26] For details, refer to Ramaswamy (1999).

marginalised and came to be treated as 'Muslim' language or alien. This alienation is also seen in the iconography of India as the all nourishing mother or Hindu Goddess[27]. Even when the nation is imagined as a female body, one cannot deny the religious element present in such an imagination which points out towards the institutionalisation of a particular form of nationalism. Nationalist historiography has attempted to preserve the grand narrative of the one Indian identity ignoring the different collective or individual identity which also needs to be recognised. What is seen in India is a politics of majority. Hindus, being the majority dominated Indian nationalism which developed on the direction of Hindu nationalism. History has been created and narrated in such a way, citizens cannot relate to history outside a mainstream-nationalist past. This hegemonisation of the Indian culture by Brahmanical, Hindu, Sanskrit text has been challenged by authors writing on Dalit identity, other minority groups as well as using other sources for the history of India. As Partha Chatterjee (1994) and Shahid Amin (2002) have argued that, there is a need to break from the elitist nationalist histories and look at alternatives. Partha Chatterjee (1994) has suggested a singular and confederal history that looks at fragments rather than one narration.

The history of the nation has developed in a singular path that aims to control the masses as part of a nationalist project by creating one homogeneous entity. Similar voice is found in Sumit Sarkar's (1993) observation that Hindu nationalism is a Gramscian war of position. They are the dominant ideas and practices which must be accepted by the 'subordinated' groups in order to own a better position in the social order. Hindu nationalism also becomes the dominant ideology, an affirmation of identity, an expression of new economic and political power.

Language, being a more concrete factor to give a sense of belonging to the people, thus became one of the great impediments in ascertaining national unity in newly independent countries of South and Southeast Asia. Yet, it also became a drawback as throughout this area the demand for linguistic autonomy began challenging the authority

[27] Sugata Bose (1997) argues that Banga-mata or Mother Bengal comes across as the image of an affectionate, protective, all-giving, powerful mother goddess of the Hindus, either Durga or Lakshmi in the writings of Tagore, Bankim Chandra which later became the icon of Bharatmata. Another mention of the imagination of the Bharat or India as a mother, similar to a Hindu Goddess is found in the article "The Life and Times of Bharat Mata: Nationalism as Invented Religion" by Sadan Jha.

of central governments threatening their stability and a greater movement towards linguistic regionalism. Bringing in the context of India, Windmiller (1954) points out India's linguistic problem to be the greatest in the world, because of factors such as the size and population of India, linguistic diversity and India's interest to solve the problem within the framework of parliamentary democracy. Although he mentions the main language diversity to be between the North and the South, a divide can be also found along the north-eastern part of the country. Fear of northern domination has produced a curious sense of Dravidian solidarity among the southern people and in some cases a rejection of Hindi as a uniting language.

India's Federal Policy

To deal with the internal crisis of diversity the Indian state follows a policy of federal form of government. Ray (1979, p.1471) marks out the in-built assumptions in the organisational process of federal polity.

> *'First, though specific federal structures are largely the product of historical evolution, at all points of time they derive their political and moral legitimacy in the context of the socio-economic goals of the body- politic. Secondly, the possibility of all power-centres to aggrandize at the cost of the weaker ones makes it imperative for federal polity to have some built-in corrective mechanism to continuously rectify any operational imbalance between the twin pulls of national unity and regional autonomy. Thirdly, where 'regions' are not a matter of choice, but given historical categories, the process of institution-building in federal polity involves considerable structural innovation and improvisation to maintain the tenuous balance between the demands of regional autonomy and needs of national unity'.*

The broad framework of the federal structure was borrowed by the Indian ruling classes from the erstwhile colonial masters. Indian federal polity shares the problem of regional disparities inherent in the process of capitalist development; more so, because such regional imbalances are product of colonial capitalism of, a relatively developed phase. Recent developments can be seen in terms of sharpening the regional and other super-structural loyalties on the basis of regional disparities operating in a general situation of slow growth, no growth or negative growth which has hampered the process of national growth. It has affected the federal polity and even national unity. The broad territorial divisions are historical categories around which history, politics, economics

and mythology have all combined to produce deep emotional attachments, often in competition with the national identity and the possibility of manipulating these historical categories as a technique of conflict-resolution remains relatively limited. It is a challenge for the state to explore the possibilities of using such categories to advantage in the process of economic development and federal consolidation. Market, development and disparities have a very strong connotation in federal structure. Regional disparities may tend to strengthen regional barriers as political fortification for regional power structures. Ray (ibid., p.1472) points out the movements built up by the Akali party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the Shiv Sena, the National Conference of other similar organisations in what are euphemistically described as sensitive border areas. Any manifestation of central authority that promises to force through the logical concomitants of a unified market evokes spontaneous legitimation from the most powerful section of the ruling classes and the elite who are the principal beneficiaries of the market and its unified character. The coercive and expanding apparatus of centralised authority like the Central Reserve Police, Border Security Force, Industrial Security Force receive instinctive legitimacy from the ruling classes and the elite despite their extra-constitutional origins. The growing strength of the armed forces has become a means to remind the state of its 'strength' and power over its citizens. These instruments of state-power are both in real and potential terms instruments for the enforcement of centralised authority against regional 'distortions'; and such a situation has ominous potentials for authoritarian abuse by creating 'state of exception'[28] in such regions. Democratic values then become dictatorship. In order to fulfill the demand of a unified market in a plural society full of regional imbalances, uneven growth, and unequal burden of an uncertain process of growth inevitably calls for the recurrent resort to the coercive apparatus of state power which makes it difficult to distinguish the political system from authoritarianism.

It is in this sense that the process of institutionalising the basic federal propensities of the Indian body-politic, and the legitimation of its regional identities, is

[28] Georgio Agamben (2003), in State of Exception, argues that the government uses the state of exception to build a nation which involves deploying violence to institute order. AF(SP)A applied in Manipur, Kashmir are examples of creation of state of exception in India.

part of the struggle against the built-in premium to the emergence of authoritarian political structure. In other words, it is the cultural milieu of the ruling elite and the dominant regions that determine the planning process to which other sections and other regions are expected to conform as part of the 'national integration' or the project of nation-building. India, a case of liberal democracy has very strong leanings to organic nationalism. In case of organic nationalism, democracy might turn into authoritarian statism and minority communities can get excluded from full membership of a nation[29].

Rather than developing the same types of institutions in all regions, in the name of uniformity and national integration, policies could be made keeping in view the need of regional specificities to general advantage. Uniformity of institutions to the cause of national integration is not the necessity, in which, diversity, in accordance with the requirements of regional specificities, contributes to the cumulative improvement of national life. One should also take into account the relative linguistic and cultural homogeneity of the Indian states which provides the additional advantage of facilitating the process of social and political communication which is an important ingredient of any policy-making or implementation. It is an aid to the broader dissemination of developmental goals and priorities, so necessary for popular participation and mass consciousness.

Language has become a major problem to the federal polity and unity of India as there has been renewed plea for legitimisation, and further rationalisation, of the territorial divisions of the country based on linguistic and cultural homogeneity, as the main unit of political power and economic development. It is the most important in-put to the strength and unity of the country. Questioning the Indian state's 'democratic' policies Ray (1979, p.1474) makes an interesting observation that

> *'It is obvious that the base of popular perception of the benefits of national unity is not as broad as is often conveniently taken for granted in official pronouncements on the subject. Such questions like "National Unity for What and for Whom?" cannot long be avoided in countries where popular perceptions of such unity have to be constantly moulded by the visible manifestations of the coercive apparatus of State-power*'.

[29] Michael Mann (2005) has discussed about organic and stratified population in the chapter "Two Versions of "We, the People"" in The Dark Side of Democracy:Explaining Ethnic Cleansing.

The repressive structure of the state can find an alternative in Will Kymlicka's (1995) view of combining minority rights, i.e. group rights with liberal theories of individual rights. The 'liberal culturalism' position developed by Will Kymlicka has become the dominant interpretation of communal attachment today. He has argued about the cultural structure being an important asset of national communities which establishes the justifiable parameters of the social unity they presumably embody and strive to preserve. Autonomy, Kymlicka claims, depends upon the existence of a medium by which citizens can be aware of the options available to them and for meaningful individual choice to be possible; individuals need access to a societal culture. Apart from an age of nationalism and migration, the 19th century is also marked by the presence of a new 'politics of cultural difference'. While it was viewed as a threat by many scholars, he sees a consistency between the demands of the ethnic and national groups with the liberal principles of individual freedom and social justice. The diversity among countries give rise to clash among majority and minority over issues of minority rights, regional autonomy, political representation, land claim, etc and even over national symbols and public holidays. Answering these questions is a challenge to democracy. Multiethnicity is a common feature throughout history of most organised political community, yet most of the political theories deal with the assumption of citizens sharing a common descent, language and culture. Cultural minorities have suffered through physical elimination or ethnic cleansing, coercive assimilation, economic discrimination, denial of political rights owing to government's policies to achieve a homogenous polity. Although efforts such as bilateral treaties to protect cultural minorities have been undertaken historically, it proved to be inadequate. It marked a shift from group specific minority rights to universal human rights, guaranteeing basic civil and political rights to all individuals. However Kymlicka argues for the traditional human rights to be supplemented with minority rights. Stating many of the western democracies as multinational[30], instead of a nation-state, he argues that survival of such states depend on the allegiance of the various national groups to the larger political community inhabited by them. He refuses to call such an allegiance a

[30] multination state is a country with more than one nation where the smaller cultures form national minorities. American Indians, Puerto Ricans are the national minorities in United States who got involuntarily incorporated in the US through conquest or colonization.

form of national identity but distinguishes 'patriotism' as feeling of allegiance to a state from national identity, i.e. feeling of membership in a national group.

If federalism is seen as a viable solution to recognise the minorities' rights, the difficulty lies in maintaining the balance between centralisation and decentralisation. For federalism to turn into self government, the national minority has to be a majority in one of the federal subunits. Group specific rights, which include self-government rights, polyethnic rights, special representation rights accommodate national and ethnic differences allowing the ethnic and religious minorities to continue with their diversity. As national identities do not depend upon shared values, it becomes appropriate units of liberal theories. Group differentiating rights that protect minority cultures promotes liberal values. However, some liberals argue against such rights that supports differences over commonalities. Rather than being consistent in principle with freedom and justice, it is required to determine whether minority rights are consistent with the long term requirements of a stable liberal democracy, sustaining a level of mutual concern, accommodation and sacrifice, required by democracies. What is important is to maintain a balance between such minority rights and other liberal goals. Liberal theorist need to identify the sources that can bind a democratic multination state.

What is important is how the process of nation-building is carried out so that it itself do not turn out to be the problem. A major problem arises if the nation is always imagined as a homogeneous entity which has been pointed out time and again. If the idea of nation is organic and its population is stratified, nation-building becomes a brutal process of homogenisation. If the sense of a common history (past glory) is seen as a factor unifying the people into a nation, it would be naive to imagine everyone sharing the same impact of the history. It should not be overlooked that, in a multiethnic nation like India, the same narration can be glory for some and humiliation of defeat for other. The discussion hence brings forth the question of retaining group solidarity and sustaining it. If we consider universal citizenship as a means to liberty and equality of all citizens, it is not an adequate measure of nation-building. It is a means undertaken by the state to ensure the legal-political conditions for the deployment and exploitation of differences in civil society; it normalises the reproduction of differences by covering everyone under the umbrella of homogeneity. In such a case the very survival of minority

groups as distinct groups becomes a question. The Indian nation as well as state has been characterized by a relation of domination and exclusion to its population. At the present, in Indian democracy, providing multicultural citizenship and recognizing the rights of minorities to continue with their language, customs, religion seems a viable policy to retain the nation as one. The answer to an acceptable nation-building can be seen in the recognition of the rights of cultural minorities and uniform development in all regions.

To continue with the debate posed by Kymlicka, there is indeed a need to find a uniting factor for the multiethnic, multicultural Indian nation. The construction of the idea of India as a homogeneous entity by its nationalist leaders led to exclusion of many communities. Later on their inclusion into that entity aggravated the problem further. It was seen by such groups as a threat to their identity which is why demand of autonomous regions did not end even when India adopted a federal form of government. Whether language can be the uniting force remains a question. While it unites, on the other hand it also divides owing to different groups having different languages. At the present, in Indian democracy, providing multicultural citizenship and recognising the rights of minorities to continue with their language, customs, religion seems a viable policy to retain the nation as one although one should not ignore the possibility of an alternative form of nation building where the nation sustains through its diversity.

It is important to note here that nations are not eternal and have beginning and end. If nation depends on the will of the people to come together, they may also have a will to be separate. It can divide nations into further nations. Position of the people in the nation is an important question as the State tries to legitimate itself by drawing this legitimisation from the will of the people. Hence, it becomes mandatory for the people to accept the membership to the territory of the state and the idea of the nation for the success of nation-building. Since State has the monopoly of violence, it deploys violence even in the process of nation-building. In the name of nation-building, state provides legitimacy to violence which can be clearly seen when the state is trying to 'govern' the people in Manipur, Nagaland, Kashmir with the draconian law of AFSPA. The line between nation-building and state-building gets thinner with the overwhelming presence of the state. Such violence is resisted by the people who view the state as a brute force.

Such resistance is often seen as nationalism by the people, whereas on the other hand is seen as secessionist or separatist tendency by the state.

State formation in India has a history of tension between the imperial state and regional kingdoms. The 'ethnic politics' of groups connected to a real or imagined homeland is radically different from the politics of identity that is not grounded in homelands. The term 'micro' in micro-nationalism draws attention to the fact that nationalities are part of a sovereign state, which has a broader project of nationhood. Obligations of micro-nationalisms compete with the obligations of national citizenship which is a project of the modern state. When the modern state-formation is a project rather than an accomplished fact, there may be conflict between the will of the state and the dreams and aspirations that grow in the space of civil society. If nations and nationalities are 'imagined communities'[31], it is necessary to find the element that transforms the geography of an area into a home-like space and transforms a people into a collectivity with imagined ties of shared origins and kinship. Once an imagined community is created, space acquires emotional, rational sense and the distance gets converted into meaning. It is through such meanings that claims of micro- nationalisms grow. The modern nation state considers itself and functions to be the sole repository of the collectivist imagination of all its citizens. However, the Indian state should come to terms with and recognise the competing collective imaginings available within its political boundary.

Post independent India saw a number of regional or ethno-national movements turning into movements for independence. It brings into focus that tension exists between regions and nations. Regions and nations are not self-evident and pre-political but territorialising projects. Regions are actually political constructs even if they appear to be 'natural'. The states in India can trace their history back to millenniums although they have become political states only after India's independence in 1947. Even after new states have been created by the Indian constitution to allow and accommodate demands of regionalism, the Indian state is still struggling to find a suitable solution to the

[31] Refer to Anderson (1991).

demands of autonomy rising within the country. Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Kashmir has become a ground of contested narratives.

India and Inherent Problems

The states within India too are a blend of different identities just like India where each community has its own traditions, dialects, and tribal and ethnic peculiarities. Ray (1979) points out that most of the 'Indian states' are not simply functional devices but represent more or less distinct linguistic, cultural and, in some cases, even ethnic units, with a continuous civilisation older than their federated existence.

The present state boundaries in India have little relation to the distribution of language group which draws attention to the fact that the British did not consider linguistic homogeneity as a factor while drawing up the state boundaries. This has become a grave problem of majority-minority conflict within the states in India. India is in constant flux as it creates new states in response to new demands for autonomy and state reorganisation has become a policy for India to remain as one. There have been numerous criteria for the formation or reorganisation of states. Among these arguments, Majeed (2003, p.84) points out to

> *'……geographical proximity, a common language, similar usages and customs, comparable socioeconomic and political stages of development, common historical traditions and experiences, a common way of living, administrative expediency, and, more than anything else, a widely prevalent sentiment of "togetherness", that is, a sense of shared identity.'*

However, the problem with the state formation can be traced back to the reorganisation of states in 1956 when all linguistic areas were not given territorial recognition and also often not treated as politically coherent units reflecting the aspirations of their inhabitants to manage their own affairs. Demands were made for new states through regional movements and language was often the symbol giving expression to these aspirations. Such demands were usually treated as a threat to national integration. Arguing in favour of reorganisation, Majeed points out that 'reorganization may serve good governance if four requirements are met: (1) administrative convenience, (2) economic viability, (3) similarity in the developmental needs of a sub- region, and (4) cultural-linguistic affinity' (ibid., p. 86).

The government of India had followed a federal form of government and a policy of 'states' reorganization' through language in order to maintain the national integrity of the country in the face of a heterogeneous population. This involves both the adjustment of state boundaries as well as the creation of new states. The reorganisation of states or the creation of a new state in the name of inequality or identity can also be looked at as a drive by regional elite that hope to displace the existing elite. Even after the reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis, further demands for linguistic homogeneity emerge. The assertion of a regional identity may also be based on a common history of grievances emanating from an underdeveloped regional economy. Such identity assertions are usually also seen as forces that are a threat to national unity.

As early as 1947, it was feared that formation of states based on linguistic lines would lead to the development of sub-nationalities that would ultimately agitate to become sovereign states. The reorganisation was also not complete because all the linguistic areas were not given territorial recognition. These regions were often not treated as politically coherent units reflecting the aspirations of their inhabitants to manage their own affairs. In this competition for resources, the regions used several benchmark such as language, culture, economic advancement, administrative coherence, and even the socioeconomic backwardness of the region to establish their identity.

> *'All states do not share the same interests. More prosperous states, such as the Punjab, may resist redistribution of income among states by the Center, claiming that they are being unfairly exploited or that they do not receive a fair share back for what they contribute to the national economy. Other states, like Assam, Bengal, and Kerala, claim to be victims of Center neglect and discrimination. The more backward states, especially those of the Hindi heartland, look to the Center to redress disparities'.* (Hardgrave 1983, p.1172)

Regional movements sparked demands for the formation of new states as well as the reorganisation of existing states. When agitations in strategically sensitive border areas continue for a long period, it involves basic interests of national security.

In order to avoid the crisis of 'mainstream' and 'periphery' it was necessary for the national leadership to consider and find out viable solutions to the social, economic, and historical imbalances between regions in a state. Another demand for the formation of new states emanated from a perceived neglect, or what has been termed 'internal

colonialism' of the peripheral state by the mainstream. The essence of this argument is that the relationship between the dominant social group in a region and the peripheral groups is characterised by exploitation. Even the states in India, being multi-ethnic raises the question whether all sections and all groups within a state share the same values and the same concerns. The assumption of a new exclusive identity may exclude some peripheral identities, and this can make some people feel marginalised and deprived. Not everyone shares the dominant culture; therefore, there is always the possibility that some groups may feel discriminated against. The expression of dissatisfaction by some groups often leads to similar reactions and demands by others, and sometimes even to separatism and secessionism. The micro-nationalist project of Kashmir, Punjab, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur have always been a challenge to the macro-nationalist project of India.

Regional Nationalism in India

From time to time, Kashmiri identity seeks political expression and assertion resulting in the political mobilisation of the masses and their emotional involvement around certain pertinent issues. The earliest instance of such political assertion can be traced back to 1930s and 1940s. An overwhelming majority of Kashmiris sharing a common religion leads many observers to emphasise Islam as an important factor underlying Kashmiriyat or 'new Kashmir'. Of course, it can't be denied that there are instances when Kashmiri identity takes religious overtones. The roots of the present day conflict in Jammu & Kashmir can be traced directly to the Treaty of Accession signed by the maharaja of Kashmir on October 26, 1947. He later signed the Standstill Agreement[32] with Pakistan on August 15, 1947, as the. However, soon tribesmen from Pakistan's northwestern regions invaded the princely state of Kashmir in October while, at the same time, the Poonch District on the state's western border with Pakistan declared its independence from Dogra rule. During this time, the maharaja requested military assistance from the Indian central government who refused to provide any military support to the princely state until and unless the maharaja formally acceded to India. Maharaja Hari Singh had to

[32] According to this agreement both India and Pakistan had to continue the existing arrangements that had prevailed between the state of Jammu & Kashmir and the outgoing British government.

finally sign the Instrument of Accession on October 27, 1947[33]. Although India recognised the Kashmiri people's distinct cultural identity in the form of Kashmiriyat, it also asserted that the similarities between Kashmir and the Indian state were based on their common secular, socialist, and democratic agendas. Interestingly, this has become the basis by which the secular Indian elite and the most popular Kashmiri nationalist group, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), have come to define the Kashmiri 'nation' and its relationship with India. All the while, however, Jammu's Dogra population remained critical of India's position on special status for the state of Jammu & Kashmir. There lacks a consensus among the people of Jammu and Kashmir regarding integration with the Indian state[34].

Underlying the political upsurge in Kashmir is a distinct conception of Kashmiri identity. The great majority of the Valley's population appeared to support the essentially secular secessionist cause within the framework of the traditionally composite Kashmiri identity known as Kashmiriyat. The politics of Kashmir in the period after the accession revolved around the factor of the assertion of Kashmiri identity however the migration of virtually the entire Hindu community out of the Valley during the 1990s has created a pronounced demographic transformation in the Kashmir region. The recent demands for Kashmiri freedom from Indian rule appear to be increasingly situated within the communal theme of protecting an exclusive Muslim Kashmiri identity. The Valley is now characterised by an almost homogeneous population and a monolithic culture. This has led to the conflating of political goals (separating from India to protect a distinct Kashmir history and identity) with Islamic goals. *Azadi*, freedom from the Indian state, has remained the unifying theme among the irredentists, who seek a formal association with Pakistan, as well as the secessionists, who want an independent and united Jammu &

[33] India's governor-general, Lord Mountbatten, accepted the offer of accession under special circumstances and informed Maharaja Hari Singh that the question of accession would be placed before Kashmir's population once the territory had been cleared of the tribal invaders. It was accepted by Nehru who in a detailed statement to the Constituent Assembly of India, reasserted the ultimate right of the people of Kashmir, under the supervision of an impartial international tribunal such as the U.N., to decide their future political association.

[34]In 1952, the Praja Parishad—the Jammu-based Hindu party that is closely affiliated with Bhartiya Jan Sangh (Indian People's Alliance) and its cultural parent Rashtriya Sewak Sangh started a protest movement seeking the state's complete accession to and full integration with India. The year 1989 saw the demand for autonomy converted into calls for *azadi* that received the support of most of the Muslim population of the valley.

Kashmir. The political issues that emerged as the most significant for Kashmiris were related to the politics of political dignity, independent political space and the self-rule.

The crisis in Punjab involves a combination of economic, cultural, and religious issues, with identity of the Sikh community being at the core of the agitation. In 1966, the demand for a separate Sikh state was fulfilled by the Indian government with the creation of Punjab and Haryana but Chandigarh, the capital, remain unsolved along with the issues of distribution of river water. The demands put forth by the Akali in the 1973 Anandpur resolution 'include virtually complete autonomy for the state, leaving to the Center only defense, external affairs, communications, currency, and railways'. (Hardgrave 1983, p.1178)

Another strand of separatist (according to Indian state) or nationalist (according to the people) movement is seen in the north-eastern part of India which is a fertile ground of ethnic-based resistance movements that has only increased in the post-independence era. The independence of India in 1947 marked the need to create a politically united Indian state with well defined international borders. With the reorganisation of international borders with eastern neighbours like Bangladesh, the then East Pakistan, Tibet, China, Nepal, Myanmaar and Bhutan, the northeastern region emerged as a separate geopolitical region connected to the Indian mainland with a narrow patch of land. The region that had served as one of the greatest migratory routes in history became a sensitive region owing to its sharing of boundaries with territorially well defined nation-states.

The region comprising the states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh exhibits unique features in terms of its social, economic and demographic characteristics. Apart from the insurgency problems, the region has also witnessed inter-ethnic conflicts often backed by their respective insurgency groups. The emergence of ethnic assertion and contest for social and political control pose serious political problems and thus needs serious consideration. This assertion is based on 'fears' of assimilation especially by the dominant groups and the need to protect the ethnic territoriality and natural resources, i.e., land. To counter the armed struggle carried on by the various insurgency organizations, the, the Government

of India has reciprocated with military power under the provisional power of Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. Viewing the prevailing political issue and the resistance movements in the north-eastern region as mere 'law and order' problems shows the failure of the government of India in tackling the region's problems. Autonomy is one major demand by these organisations that has been labeled as insurgent which is based on the claim that prior to the British colonialism, the area which now constitutes the northeastern part of India were independent kingdoms. The late 1970s witnessed clashes between the Indian Army and insurgents of the Mizo National Army and the Mizo National Front, demanding independence for Mizoram, was banned in 1979.

> *'Throughout their nearly 30 years of struggle against the Government of India, the Naga National Council (NNC) the political wing of the underground Naga Federal Government has consistently maintained that the Nagas constitute an independent nation. The NNC claims that, except for a century of British rule, the Nagas had never been subjugated and ruled by any other people and had never been part of what today constitutes the Indian nation. This feeling of separateness from the rest of the Indian state is so widely shared by the Nagas that it may be said to be one of the prime forces in their long struggle against a powerful adversary.'* (Misra 1978, p.618)

In 1980, Underground groups fighting for sovereignty in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh formed the Seven United Liberation Army (SULA) in 1980 supporting the creation of an independent federation of the Northeast by armed struggle although it failed to garner substantial support. Such claims and armed struggles have drawn serious national and international attention to their cause.

The nationality question is very complex in north-east India in general and Assam in particular. Linked with ethnicity, micro-nationalist politics has remained a characteristic of Assam. Assamese micro-nationalism can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century when it asserted its autonomous existence against the British colonial view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal. The recurrent politics of micro-nationalism in the northeastern state of Assam, which will be dealt with explicitly in the next section, is its assertion of its distinct language and culture against the homogenizing nature of the Indian state and fear of minoritisation and a demand for the equal

distribution of resources. Underdevelopment of the state is another major theme which takes into account the centre-periphery debate.

In Assam, modernisation-urbanisation, expansion of communications, literacy, newspapers and magazines, educational institutions have acted as a bridge between villages, towns and cities; and helped the cultural and literary elites, the newly educated youth and the Assamese peasantry and the urban middle and working classes to reproduce both imagined and real ties of family and kinship. In such a case the affiliation is more towards the community rather than the state. Community comes to represent the nation and community ties are sentiments of nationalism. These are used as a pressure for the state to recognise the diversities that does not easily yield to territorial boundedness. In such situations, the existing idea of nationalisms perpetuated by the nation state may prove to be rather unfortunate modern transplants and a hindrance to the imaginaire of homelands.

Nationalist projects, a result of the age of nationalism try to create formal boundedness over territories. It is difficult to fit the imagination of homelands into a political formation that have been created out of a sub-continental empire made up of regional kingdoms and a cultural formation. In response to demands for separation by smaller nationalities, the state of Assam as it existed during independence has changed its boundaries a number of times. Even within the present state of Assam, there are other movements seeking further fragmentation of Assam in order to accommodate more homelands. To some extent these movements are the consequences of the exclusionary implications of the Assamese project of a homeland. The following section will deal with the formation of an Assamese identity or 'homeland' which is at times imagined within the Indian state by some and sometimes as an autonomous one. The rejection of this hegemonic identity in turn by communities within the state and imagination of an alternate homeland as well as identity by the Tai-Ahom population of the state will be followed up in the next chapter.

SECTION-II

Assam and Politics of Identity

Even after the formation of states in India, there still exists tension between the imperial state and regional kingdoms; proving nationalisms and the nation state to be nothing more than unfortunate modern transplants. Persuasion and coercion has been the means through which the Indian state has incorporated micro-nationalist dissent of a number of people while carrying out its nation-building process. Though mapped within the Indian state, the exclusion of Assam from it is evident from the precolonial times (Saikia, 2005). It was placed outside the 'Indian' or Aryan history by the colonial administrators writing down the history of Assam. The inhabitants of this place were seen to be living without history and this perspective only got reinforced in postcolonial India. The perception that the region is a 'militant' frontier and a disturbed zone has not died out and thus affects the development of the place. Such views are further accentuated by the claims to recognition demanded by the various communities residing in the region. Bordering China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal, Assam constitutes numerous ethnic groups and is a site of identity struggle.

While the term 'Assam' once was almost synonymous with what is called northeast India today, present-day Assam is only one of seven northeastern states, and acts as a key state as a communication gateway to the other states. When we look at Assam, it should be kept in mind that this geographical area is not a consistent one and the boundaries of the state have undergone transformation. This study focuses on the area that is the state of Assam as it is today which includes the Brahmaputra valley, the Barak valley, and some of the hills surrounding these two valleys. The origin of the word 'Assam' continues to be a debatable issue[35]. Prior to the 16th century, the name Assam does not appear in any ancient literary or inscriptional sources. For the first time, Abul Fazal, a contemporary of Akbar's period, refers to the name as Asham, in his well known book Ain-I-Akbari which points out that this place was known as Asham to Muhammadan historian. Till the conquest of the Ahoms, pragjyotisa was known as Kamrup. During the early British rule, it was known as Asam. Another assumption is that

[35] Saikia (2005); Gait (2008).

this word has been derived from *Asama* or 'uneven' differentiating it from the level plains of 'East Bengal' which Gait (2008) dismisses as unlikely. It has been observed that the term 'Assam' 'nowhere occurs prior to the Ahom occupation, and in the Bansabali of the Koch kings, it is applied to the Ahoms rather than to the century which they occurred' (ibid., p.433). Different authors[36] have recorded that the origin of 'Assam' is linked with the 'Ahom' who called themselves Tai. It might have been a derivation from Shan, or Syam that refer to the people of Siam. The Ahom traditions point towards 'Asama' which means 'unequalled' or 'peerless'. This term was first applied to the Ahoms under Sukapha by the local tribes for their courage. But 'Asama' being a Sanskrit word raises doubt regarding the use of it by local tribes. Yet it is an Assamese equivalent to 'Tai' which means 'glorious'. The Ahoms called themselves Tai. These connections make it necessary to investigate the assertion of identity by the Ahoms in the light of Assamese history. The modern name 'Assam' seems to have been derived from the appellation 'Asama'.

Situated in one of the easternmost corner of India, Assam lies between the foothills of the eastern Himalayas and Patkai and Naga ranges. In the beginning of the medieval period, Assam was separated into two parts called Uttara Kula (North Bank) and Dakshina Kula (South Bank)[37], by the river Brahmaputra flowing, from north-east to south-west. It also included an island called Majuli. Vertically it is divided as Upper Assam (the eastern part) and Lower Assam (the western part). Upper Assam constitutes the highlands of the frontier tracts whereas Lower Assam is mainly plains comprising the Brahmaputra and the Surma or Barak valleys. In its Western part was the old kingdom of Kamarupa comprising the areas between the rivers Karatoya in the West and Bhareli in the east with its capital at Kamarupanagar, present day Gauhati which later got shifted to Kamatapur near the present town of Koch Bihar sometime after 1257 and came to be known as Kamata. In this part, the political authority was in the hands of the Bhuyans who were the landlords acting as the revenue assessment officers. The Chutiya and the Kachari kingdom were towards the eastern part. Extending from the Bhareli to Brahmakund across the Brahmaputra was the Chutiya kingdom with its capital at Sadiya.

[36] Refer to Saikia (2006); Gait (2008).
[37] Refer to Ahmad (1990, p.169).

Bounded by the rivers Kapili and Dikho, the Kachari kingdom had its capital at Dimapur. The Marans, the Barahis, the Tipamiyas and the Nagas resided to the east of Dikho. Assam in the early 13th century witnessed foreign invasions in the west by the Turko-Afgans of the Ganga plain and in the south-east by the Tai-Shans of Burma. These Tai-Shans reached the Upper Brahmaputra Valley in 1228 and came to be designated as the Ahoms.

Assam though was a land of numerous small kingdoms yet largely unknown to the outside world until the British arrived in 1826. 'Assamese' was a category that was created to separate the population of the valley from the hills and aid in British governability. This category of Assamese was easily integrated into the Hindu fold but was given the status of a lower-caste, non-Aryan Hindu people. Before constructing the Assamese category, the British also labeled a group, the mighty rulers of the Brahmaputra valley, as 'Ahom' whom they believed to have migrated to the valley from across the mountain ranges of Upper Burma. The failure to find a distinct community of Ahom in Assam made it feasible for the census takers to dismiss them as 'dead' in 1931 and replaced the label 'Ahom' with the newly constructed term and group called 'Assamese'. Colonial intervention ended the histories preceding their rule and disrupted communications with groups that were mapped outside British India. Thus, the categories 'Assamese' and 'Ahoms' were constructions made to serve the administrative purpose of the British[38]. It was an attempt to label a heterogeneous population under one umbrella just as it was done for the rest of the colonies. Scholars and even local people came to accept these categories and the region came to be seen as always existing as 'Assam' though its boundary changed from time to time. During the colonial period, Assam also included Sylhet that later became part of Pakistan, and at present Bangladesh, as well as the hills surrounding the plains of Assam that today are separate Indian states- Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. Prior to the British colonisation of the region, the hill tribals of north-eastern India was neither a part of India nor of "Assam" but maintained trade relations with the neighbouring people of the Brahmaputra valley. They maintained their own distinct tribal culture, tradition, taboos and social systems which were quite different from those of the people of the valley.

[38] Saikia (2005).

Assam, considered as the gateway to the north-eastern part of India, is connected to the mainland India by a narrow patch of land. However, it was never politically integrated with the great north Indian empires prior to the advent of the British colonialism. This lack of political integration was the result of more profound economic and social causes and the disconnectedness persists even to this day. This claim need serious reviewing as the Assam that had remained aloof from the Indian 'mainland' is not the present state of Assam owing to the reorganisation of the state a number of times.

Connected to six other north-eastern states and sharing a long border with two neighbouring countries, namely Bangladesh and Bhutan, Assam has been a witness to struggle between 'insurgents' and the state as the architect of counter-insurgency. Even undivided Assam was a land of 'insurgents' that fought for independence. Das (2007, p.1) records that'[i]n the Naga Hills- then a district of Assam State, violence centering on independentist demands started in 1952. It was followed by the Mizo rebellion in 1966 and a proliferation of more recent conflicts since the late 1970s'.

Though it would be wrong to assume Assam as the only insurgency-ridden state in this country, it does occupy a special position owing to its vulnerable geographical location in a region that is surrounded by international borders on three sides. Thus while looking at the present developments of insurgency, autonomy demands, identity struggles of the state it makes sense therefore to trace the roots of these turmoils and how the formation and transformation of the community has been facilitated. Assam, as a territory, and Assamese, as a population, are not homogeneous categories and requires a look at its history to arrive at the way these categories are conceptualised in present time which also gives an insight to the rise of nationalist project in the region.

> *'Against the backdrop of the repeated reorganisation of Assam since early 1960s, transformation of four tribal-dominated districts into three small tribal states, i.e., Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, the operation of the Sixth Schedule, reservation of seats and other constitutional as well as political measures, the nationality question has remained a perpetually burning problem in Assam. The Assam movement 1979-85 and the present tribal movements in the Bodo-dominated areas in the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra and in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hill districts fundamentally reflect the complex nationality question in Assam*.' (Hussain 1992, p.1047).

If Indian nation is a melting pot of cultures, then Assam too is a mini-India with different national, ethnic, religious and linguistic and tribal groups living together in the region for centuries which makes the ethnic question a complex one. The population of Assam is a broad intermixture of Mongolian, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan races and was never a monolingual or single nationality region at any point of time. In support of this claim, Srikanth (2000, pp.4117-4118) traces the demographic composition of the state:

> *'A considerable number of people speaking Bengali and other languages and dialects also live in Assam. While the Assamese people are concentrated in the Upper Assam, the Bengalis form the majority in the three southern districts of Assam, namely, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The Hindus constitute a majority (58 per cent) and the Muslims 24 per cent of the total population. Although a majority of Muslims are Bengalis, there are many Assamese-speaking Muslims in Upper Assam. The Muslims are in substantial numbers in the districts of Goalpara, Dhubri, Nagaon and Cachar. Officially the tribal population of the state is around 13 per cent of the total population. The Karbis and Dimashas live in the hilly districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills. They have their own dialects and cultures and they do not identify wholly with the Assamese people. Besides these hill tribes, there are many plain tribes spread throughout Assam.*'

Although plain tribes, like Deuris, Tiwas, Sonowal, Kacharis, Mech Cacharis, etc, got assimilated into Assamese nationality, some others like Boros, Rabhas, Koch Rajbamshis, etc, maintain their separate identity vis-a-vis the Assamese people. There is also a mixed tea garden population composed of people originally speaking Hindi, Santhali, Mundari, Oriya or Tamil language/dialect who has developed its own distinct character and identity in Assam.

Migration has been an unavoidable phenomenon in human history. It facilitates intermixing of population (races) and assimilation, sometimes xenophobia as well as ethnophobia. Assam has a complex history of migration and the perpetuation of national, tribal, religious and linguistic identities in Assam cannot be understood without comprehending it. Unlike other states, the issue of migration in Assam is intrinsically linked with the socio-economic and political decisions of the state as well as the question of identity. Migration isn't a recent phenomenon which makes it difficult to recognise the claims for constituting the indigenous population. Srikant (2000, p.4118) observes that

'almost all groups living here seem to have come to this region from different places, at different points in time.' This makes the history of immigration in Assam a different process of assimilation very unlike western countries where the immigrants almost wiped out the aboriginal community to build new nations. The indigeneous inhabitants of the state accommodated the outsiders who inturn adjusted and sometimes even took up the local cultural practices and languages. The Ahoms, who had migrated from south-east Asia and later came to rule most parts of Upper Assam is an interesting example of such assimilation. Another interesting point to note is that in course of time they came to define the Assamese identity.

Assamese Identity Formation

The negative recognition of Assamese by the colonials was criticised by pioneers such as Moniram Dewan and Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan[39], who suggested new and positive descriptions for community identification. Though the colonial name 'Assamese' was accepted, the focus was on constructing an inclusive community dissolving the demarcation between plains and tribal people, Hindu and non-Hindu communities of Assam. Assamese became a blended community, language being the factor of the bond. The Assamese linguistic identity intensified as a result of colonial administrative policies in Assam. The nationalist movement brought about the ideology of independent Assam along with the construction of a linguistic identity for the Assamese people. It was a quest to investigate, understand, and manifest an Assamese identity through self-awareness and Assamese language and poetry became tools to express this consciousness and sentiment. Lakhinath Bezbaruah, Ambikagiri Raychoudhury, and Kamala Kanta Bhattacharjee became the leaders of this self awareness movement. The Ahom community residing in the upper Assam region feared their minoritisation in the hands of the Hindu Assamese middle class and did not support this movement. Instead they brought about a struggle to assert their own identity distinct from the Assamese which will be dealt with in greater details in the succeeding chapter.

Interestingly, Sanjib Barua brings in the idea of sub-nationalism to capture the Assam identity movement. For Barua (1999, p.5) 'sub-nationalism refers to 'a 'pattern of

[39] Refer to Saikia, http://www.india-seminar.com/2005/550/550%20yasmin%20saikia.htm.

politicization and mobilization that meets some of the criteria of nationalism, but is not committed firmly to the idea of separate statehood'. The term is used to describe a situation at a particular historical moment and includes projects of cultural hegemony. For the convenience of studying, the growth of Assamese identity can be divided into phases which overlap and contribute to each other. As has already been mentioned, Assam inhabits a multiplicity of population in terms of race, language and even geography. Although the division of the population along the lines of classes cannot be denied, yet ethnic identity has always had an upperhand. The very first attempt for a homogeneous Assam was the creation of a common factor, and here, the factor being a standardized Assamese language. The need was to develop a language and culture that could cut across all barriers within the state. In this direction, the phases of growth of a separate Assamese national identity involve linguistic nationalism, Bihu, the celebration of nature and harvest, as a uniting culture or festival, songs by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika is the icon of Assamese society in national as well as international front. The creation of a separate Assamese identity led to a critical view of the Indian state's treatment to Assam which gave way to the Assam movement of 1979. It was the beginning of a period of questioning the exploitation meted out to a region within the nation by the state itself. What began as a quest for an Assamese identity later became a radical movement seeking a sovereign Assam.

The development of the Assamese language is a result of interaction among different tribal groups in Assam and words belonging to different dialects have got accepted within the Assamese language and now are known as Assamese itself instead of a different origin. However the growth of Assamese as the lingua franca of the Brahmaputra valley is generally attributed to the Ahom rule. But it was only during the colonial rule that there was an uprise of Assamese nationality based on language. The attempt by the colonial rulers to impose Bengali as the official language of Assam was projecting as a deliberate attempt on the part of all the Bengalis to dominate the Assamese people. It was then that the Assamese middle class leadership mobilized the Assamese people and demanded that Assamese should be made the official language of the region. Simultaneously efforts were also made to develop Assamese language and literature. It was a period of Assamese nationalism when many tribes like Deuris, Tiwas,

Sonowal, Kacharis, Mech Kacharis and others, got assimilated into the Assamese fold. Historically the regional nationalism, or subnationalism, in India arose simultaneously with-and indeed sometimes predating pan-Indian nationalism. Typically the cultural foundation of subnationalism was the language of a region, or the language that was emerging as a regional standard. In that sense, the earliest assertion of Assamese cultural pride, much before it turned into nationalist feeling, was a reaction to the decision of the British colonial officials to constitute Bengali as the language of rule in Assam. Thus, it can be said that the theme of asserting the autonomy and distinctiveness of Assamese language and culture is almost as old as the British conquest of Assam. An organisation called Axomiya Bhaxa Unnati Xadhini Xobha (Association for the Development of the Assamese Language) was formed in 1888 in Calcutta which can be seen as a predecessor to the nineteenth century Axom Sahitya Sabha. It was concerned with the development of the Assamese language for the development of the Assamese people. While taking into account the standardisation of Assamese language by the late nineteenth century, the Assamese spoken in Upper Assam, the center of the old Ahom kingdom, got accepted as standard modern Assamese. Yet it was a difficult task to apply the one language theory in Assam due to prevailing Bengali influence and the unconnectedness of the hill areas with the plains.

Assamese national imagination was further fueled by the songs of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, one of the most influencial figures in postcolonial Assamese cultural life and his songs defy linguistic boundaries. His lyrics are socio-political in nature and convey human emotions which are easy to relate to by the masses. In his music one finds '…the constant reflection of the political moods of the Assamese. Using his lyrics, one can construct an unofficial history of the Assamese nationality- its hopes, aspirations, and disappointments' (Baruah 1999, p.88). Even the radical and militant turn of Assamese quest for a national identity found mention in Hazarika's lyrics. The nation as mother is repeatedly evoked in his songs making the connection of 'people to its homeland primal, and the implied idea of a common womb gives members of the nation a sense of shared origins that minimizes differences' (ibid.). The nation as mother, the Brahmaputra as the lifeline of the region, celebration of spring and new year festival of Bihu during the first

month-Bohag, supporting the Assam movement are not mere subjects in Hazarika's lyrics but a construction of Assamese nationality, a collective and a memory.

Though Baruah (1999) looks at Assam's quest for an independent identity as a subnational project, he denies the presence of any hard and fast conceptual distinction between national and subnational projects. In that sense, the ideology of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) that has given Assamese subnationalism a militant and radical turn is best described as Assamese nationalism. It was the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826 between Burma and the British rulers of India that ended the Anglo-Burmese war and incorporated Assam, an Ahom kingdom, into the British India. Prior to that Assam was a sovereign state and ULFA seeks to restore Assam to that period of independence. The demand for an autonomous Assam was raised for the first time by ULFA.

Before Assam became a part of India and in-turn the imperial project of the colonial powers, the Ahom kingdom had defeated and successfully resisted several attempts by the Mughals to include 'Assam' into their province. This victory of the Ahom Kingdom is celebrated as a victory of Assam against foreign (Mughal) invasion which itself is a case of remembering and forgetting history conveniently. While doing so it is forgotten that the Ahoms had originally come from a foreign land and invaded many small kingdoms within Assam in order to establish their kingdom. This very kingdom established by the Ahoms in the precolonial times, located in the extreme northeastern corner of the subcontinent, can be described as the cultural heartland of modern Assam.

The influx of illegal Bangladeshis is a burning problem for Assam which to a great extent has dictated the Assamese consciousness to have and be recognised as a distinctive identity. After independence, the territory of Assam shrunk as most of the hill districts of the state demanded separation. This, along with the increasing illegal immigration have imbibed a fear of losing their identity among the Assamese which found expression in the students' movement in 1979 and then in the rise of ULFA. But this very subnational formation known as the Assamese has again come under significant challenge in Assam today from communities such as Bodos, Dimasas, Ahoms. While majority of the ethnic groups have assimilated into the Assamese subnational formation, certain upsurge is a result of the determination to reverse the process.

Mainstreaming 'Assamese' Identity

Assam remained a land frontier attracting large-scale immigration through much of the twentieth century which began primarily as a consequence of the colonial conquest. Figures on immigrations in Assam have become a matter of intense political contestation, especially since the Assam movement of 1979-85. Though only the first generation is ideally the immigrant community and most of them adopt Assamese ways in due course of time, yet the label of being immigrant to the state have remained with the population comprising Muslims and Hindus of Bengali descent, Marwaris, Nepalis, Tea labour community. It is difficult to create a nation-province for the ethnic Assamese in Assam within the present political boundary of Assam primarily because of the fact that the two boundaries of ethnic and political, do not coincide. In a multiethnic society like Assam one has multiple identities; one can simultaneously belong to an ethnic group, have a different religious inclination and yet share a common identity of being an 'Assamese' with others. The adoption of singular identity and trying to magnify it only leads to inter-group conflicts and identity disintegration. Hence, the multiethnic landscape of Assam was not conducive to it becoming a language-based nation province following the pan-Indian model. Also, the 'Assamese' is an abstract community. More than often, it is a broader identity encompassing primary ethnic identities. The contradiction between the Assamese subnationalist vision of an Assamese Assam and the reality of multiethnic Assam may have greatly facilitated the breakup of colonial Assam. However, the prime mover in the breakup was a powerful central government which decided that by creating new states it will be able to contain, and even prevent, insurgencies in the northeast which has turned out to be a failed policy.

The election during the later years of the Assam agitation brought a new Congress (I) government headed by Hiteswar Saikia, an Assamese, who claimed to belong to the Ahom community. His rise to power was significant, since there was a widespread perception that the Assam movement had its strongest support among ethnic Assamese 'upper' castes and not the Assamese Muslim, 'tribal', and 'immigrant' communities. The Tai-Ahom identity struggle gained momentum during his tenure.

The Assam movement finally culminated with the signing of an accord between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the leaders of the Assam movement on August 15, 1985 according to which,

> *'illegal aliens who had entered the state between January 1966 and March 1971 would be disenfranchised for ten years and those who came after march 1971 would be deported. It was agreed that the state government formed after the election of 1983 would resign, the state assembly would be dissolved, and fresh elections based on revised electoral roles would take place in December 1985. In effect, the government of India belatedly acknowledged that the decision to hold that election had been a costly mistake. An amendment to India's citizenship law was enacted by the parliament in November 1985 providing that non-citizens who were found to have entered Assam between 1961 and 1971 would enjoy all rights of citizens except the right to vote for ten years'.* (ibid., p.139)

After the signing of the accord, two new parties, the Asom Gana Parishad formed by the student leaders of the Assam movement and United Minorities Front formed by the dissident Congress (I) politicians who were either Bengali Hindu or Muslim of Bengali descent, were formed. Inefficiency of the AGP government to deal with the immigration issue led to a decline of peoples' trust in it and a new force, United Liberation front of Assam began in 1979 as a radical fringe of the Assam movement. ULFA's militant separatist stance found a sympathetic constituency in the sense of ethnic Assamese powerlessness that the non-implementation of the Assam Accord generated. However the state has responded to ULFA in a militarist way rather than in a political way. The foundation ceremony of the organisation was held on April 7, 1979 at a symbolically significant venue- the historic Rong Ghar in Sibsagar which was a palace of the Ahom kings with the goal to restore Assam's 'lost independence'. Rather than the term 'Assamese' ULFA appealed to all 'Axombaxi'- 'people living in Assam' who irrespective of his or her 'prior identity, regards Assam as motherland, treats Assam's problems as his or her own, embraces Assam's culture and is prepared to fight for Assam's future' (ibid.; p. 148). It was an attempt to cut across race barriers and make Assam a land for anyone who is patriot enough to call the land their motherland and sympathise with its problems. ULFA terms the relationship between New Delhi and Assam as colonial in which New Delhi, the centre of power of India, deprives Assam from getting its fair share of benefits from the state's natural resources of oil and natural gas.

Another argument in the wake of Assamese subnationalism is the denial of the authority of ULFA or any other elite Assamese group to speak on behalf of the people of Assam. Barua (1999) refers to Lakhi Kachari[40] who considers Assam to be 'illegally occupied' by the 'so-called Assamese' who originally migrated from Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar in search of economic opportunities and later on dominated the 'local Assamese and aboriginals'. The Bodos, Karbis, Tiwas, Rabhas though historically considered themselves a part of the composite indigenous population of Assam, they now seek to withdraw from the Assamese subnational formation, and in the case of the Bodos, even seek territorial separation (ibid., pp 173). The Bodo insurgency can be attributed to Assamese chauvinism. What started as a demand for recognition soon became a militant movement demanding autonomous claims within the state due to the disregard of Bodo grievances by both congress and AGP governments, alienation of tribal lands and Assam's language policy. The Bodo Territorial Area was created in 2004 but fractions of the Bodo militants are continuing the arms struggle.

Though the demand of Assamese as the official language of Assam was made initially to fight the immigration issue and keep alive the Assamese culture, in course of time it came to be seen as a superimposition of a culture of a few on the entire population of the state. It assuaged the fear of the small pockets of communities such as bodos, Dimasas, karbis, Kachari as well as the Bengali population who has dialects and languages of their own that varies from this Assamese language. In spite of such ruptures within the population there was a continuous attempt to institute an 'Assamese Assam' that got reflected in the Assam movement (1979 to 1985). The movement is seen as 'a campaign protesting what was alleged to be a de facto Indian government policy of admitting and enfranchising *foreigners*'. (ibid., p.115)

The six years of the Assam movement disturbed the ties between the ethnic groups of Assam. Frictions arose between indigenous and immigrant communities as well as amongst those who earlier together constituted the Assamese community, i.e. ethnic Assamese and tribal groups. The movement thus brought along with it new debates on the term 'ethnic Assamese' which was nonexistent or in extremely rare use before the

[40] See, Baruah (1999, p.173).

movement. The authority of this 'ethnic Assamese' came to be challenged by the immigrant and 'plain tribal' organisations. Thus there was a turn in events with a rise of fresh debates on who constitutes an 'ethnic' Assamese. The debate continues to this date as the question of an 'Assamese' identity was able to raise a political storm and dominate the campaign in the run-up to the Assembly election in 2011[41]. According to the All Assam Students Union, those figuring in the National Register of Citizens (NRC) 1951 and their descendants would alone be regarded as 'Assamese people'. The electoral rolls of 1952 could also be taken as the base document for the definition. The All India United Democratic Front, opposed the proposal to have the 1951 National Register of Citizens or 1952 electoral roll as the cut-off date to identify or define an Assamese as it will exclude a vast section of the people belonging to various religious and linguistic groups. Instead they propose March 25, 1971, as the cut-off date since the Assam Accord stipulates that all the migrants who entered Assam before that date would be treated as Indian citizens. The Asam Sahitya Sabha president Rong Bong Terang mentions difficulty in defining who is an Assamese. The Bodo Sahitya Sabha and Dima Halam Daogah does not support the idea of defining 'Assamese' on the basis of certain documents like the National Register of Citizens or electoral roll and considers it unfair to categorise certain sections of people as Assamese or indigenous people of the state on the basis of cut-off dates. According to the Bodo Sahitya Sabha, the search should be for 'indigenous Assamese' instead of an 'Assamese', and in such a case the Bodo people claim to be indigenous people of Assam. Many indigenous tribal groups had lived in the state before the Ahoms came and conquered them and their history has almost died down due to neglect and sometimes not even considered as part of Assamese society. To oppose the imposition of a hegemonic Assamese culture and now most tribes have come to assert their aboriginal status.

The tribal population of Assam is divided into two broad groups of the autochthon tribals and the non-autochthon tribals. The first category can again be subdivided into the tribals of the plains and the tribals of the hills, all of which are recognised as scheduled tribes. The non- autochthon tribals include various tribal groups which migrated mainly

[41] The Telegraph, 25th July, 2010, available on: http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100726/jsp/northeast/story_12726570.jsp..

from the Jharkhand area during the colonial period in search of livelihood and were employed as plantation labor.

In undivided Assam, the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Garos, Karbis and Dimasa Kacharis were the major hill tribes. They resided in geographically isolated locations different from the Brahmaputra valley and had their own small 'states' which were perpetuated without significant interference from outside. Almost all the tribals are held to be the remnants of primitive or ancient Mongolian migrants to this region, which makes them 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 civilisation and in a real sense they are the first natives of the valley. Hussain (1992, p.1047) brings forth the complex problem of the national minorities within the Indian social and political system:

> *'As a part of the resolution of issues raised by the tribal movements, Assam experienced several reorganisations leading to the drastic reduction of its size from 1,47,624 sq km to 78,525 sq km. In spite of reorganisation of the Naga Hills district as Nagaland in l963, the Lushai Hills district as Mizoram in 1972, and the United Khasi and Jaiantia Hills district and the Garo Hills district together as Meghalaya in 1969, Assam continued with a substantial tribal population both in the hills and the plains. Besides, some tribes which have attained their own states, like Nagas, Khasis and Garos, etc, are still found in good number in Assam. The tribals continue to form an important component of Assam's demography, society and polity'.*

The problem of creating a homogeneous category to define the population is also linked with this. Even when there has been a reorganisation of the states, one cannot deny the fluidity of population. While the hill tribes 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. Therefore, the major tribes of the plains like the Bodos, the Ravas, the Mishings, the Sonowals, the Tiwas and the Deuris did not get the autonomy as provided to the hill tribals under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule.

Another area of concern that has not gathered much focus is the decline in the percentage of tribal population in all the districts of the Brahmaputra valley. For Hussain (ibid.), one possible explanation of this is the assimilation of most of the tribal population with the Assamese community and total giving up of their original tribal identity. He

points out Sanskritisation to be another cause of it. Sanskritisation, particularly during the pre-colonial period, absorbed many tribals into the caste-fold both in the 'shakta' (sivaite) and the 'vaisnava' forms of Hinduism in the Brahmaputra valley. In the absence of a well-developed or a developing language of their own the tribals of the Brahmaputra valley had to accept Assamese as the medium of instruction at the school level. This educational process energised the assimilation and formation of a composite Assamese culture and nationality. From the late 19th century, Assamese became the mother-tongue of many tribals in the Brahmaputra valley and obviously those who continued with their tribal dialect/language as their mother-tongue also knew the Assamese language. Assamese as a language of education, market and exchange and as a lingua franca of inter-tribal communication was well-entrenched in the Brahmnaputra valley. Under such a situation, the tribals largely accepted the Assamese language. Hence, the tribals of the Brahmaputra valley were regarded as inseparable sub-nationalities within the larger composite Assamese nationality. The acceptance of Assamese as their language by most of the tribal population has increased the number of the speakers of the language in the Brahmaputra valley substantially. Hussain (1992), thus states the concern that infact it is not the Assamese but the tribals who are gradually losing their identity. The loss of tribal identity in the Brahmaputra valley has always been the gain of Assamese nationality. Those who have given up their tribal language have identified more strongly with the Assamese nationality and its composite culture. However, it is this loss of identity which inturn drives these very groups to again revive and assert their distinct identity.

Assamese or Ahoms

It is worth mentioning that early medieval Assam was not merely Ahom Assam. The fact that it was a land of numerous kingdoms and all these have contributed to the making of Assamese culture and society easily takes a backseat in Assam's historiography. At the cost of repeating the argument, the pride of Assam is at times synonymous to the glories of that of the Ahom kingdom of precolonial times. Upper Assam, the kind of 'Assamese' language practiced in that region all add up to form the Assamese culture that has come to hegemonise the entire population of the state. Saikia(2006) observes that Bihu, which 'is a celebration of spring and is New Year for all communities in Assam, corresponds

with the celebration of the New Year among many Tai-speaking peoples in Southeast Asia.

> *'The Tai-Ahom in Patsako believed that originally Bihu was their festival, a "Tai thing". But, the Hindus took over and made it their new year's celebration and transformed the Ahom festival'.* (Saikia 2006, p.47)

The community of the Ahoms who once assimilated with the local population to build a unique Assamese culture too now follows the path of asserting their identity as a separate one from the 'Assamese'. The next chapter will deal with an introduction to the Ahom community while focusing on their geographical location, migration to northeastern region of India, assimilation with the local population and most importantly who constitute the community of the Ahoms, i.e. how the community has struggled for an identity of its own. It is necessary to understand the context in which the Ahoms have come to revive and assert their separate identity.

Though small in number of members, the Tai-Ahom movement has raised some serious concerns regarding the breakdown of the Assamese community. It is a movement to break free from the label of 'Assamese' used as synonymous with Hinduism, a protest against marginalisation and homogenisation of a certain community. The Tai-Ahom has questioned the drive to hegemonise Hindu culture in Assam, as it is elsewhere in India, that goes against the multi-religious and multicultural societies that together constitute the Assamese.

Chapter – III

CONSTRUCTING THE TAI-AHOM

In the British administration and history writing, Assam was zoned off as a frontier, outside the lineage of Indie culture and Aryan history and the people of Assam were reduced into a group living without history. The frontierisation of Assam and the unthinkability of a history of the people of Assam survived and are reinforced in postcolonial narratives of India. This was a result of ignorance and inability of the British to understand Assamese society. However, Saikia (2006, p.34) mentions that the narrative of Assam by the native people is very different from this.

> *'Local history that is recorded in the premodern chronicles called buranjis provides a picture of a place in motion. A godlike king referred to as a swargadeo, which translates into English as "the spirit of heaven," ruled. The buranjis represent the area of the swargadeo as a blended space, a crossroads, that was continuously under construction as new groups of people were included, assimilated, and constituted to form a hybrid society referred to as kun-how, or "us," subjects of the swargadeo. Recently, under the banner of a local identity movement called "Tai-Ahom," the narrative of the crossroads is, once again, emerging'.*

The ethnic group called 'Ahom' or 'Tai-Ahom' came to Assam from China and Thailand, began their rule from 1228 AD and remained a force to reckon with in the political arena till 1828 AD. The Ahoms, being a ruling class with six hundred years of its history is a formidable force in the North East. They brought along with them their own culture, customs, traditions and rituals, however, many cultural practices have lost its importance and erased from public memory as a result of the Ahom's acculturation in Assam. It is interesting to note that ethnic groups usually get conscious about asserting their identity because of acculturation which is forced or manipulated. This is the trend all over the world. But the Tai-Ahoms acculturated themselves with the local people retaining only some of their cultural habits. It has proved to be a boomerang for them. Hence, there is a focus on reviving the lost culture. In recent years the Tai Ahom people are trying to retain and revitalize their old Tai language, traditional religious culture, and also demanding schedule tribe status under the Constitution of India. This chapter will provide a brief introduction to the Ahoms and the Thai community to which they claim

their origin. It will be followed by an analysis of the Tai-Ahom loss of identity and its revival at present times. While doing so, the phases of the movement will be discussed. If identity is constructed to achieve beneficial status, an important point of inquiry is how it is seen among the advocates of Tai-Ahom identity as well as their supporters in Thailand.

The Tai Population

Innumerable groups and subgroups of the Tai groups of people are found under various local names in the vast tract of the continent of Asia though they are now mainly concentrated in the Indo-Chinese peninsula. Migration of the Tai people in search of new regions began when the kings of different clans and dynasties started establishing their own kingdoms in China. By 5th-6th century AD, they settled in Yun-nan (of Southern China) along with their own language, culture and system of administration. Due to the effects of migration, the Tai people were divided into several other groups and subgroups, and scattered in Southeast Asia. The branch residing in Assam too has this history of migration. The Ahoms were the earliest Thais to have entered Assam during the early part of the 13th century and brought along with them, the language, culture, belief system and other Tai traits to Assam.

Besides the Ahoms there are several other groups of Tai people as Khamti, Phake, Aiton, Turung, Khamyang, who came to this valley at later periods, between the middle of the 18th century and middle of the 19th century and made their settlements in various places of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. These people brought age old culture and art tradition along with them. The people of Tai origin have been living mostly in the North-eastern parts of India. In India, there is no nomenclature of the Tai at the national level, but are known by their local and official names and the Ahom, settled mainly in the political boundary of Assam are the most predominant Tai group in India and occupy an exceptional position amongst the Tai people in South-east Asia. After continuing their rule for almost six centuries (1228-1826 AD), the Ahoms lost their power to the East India Company's Government in the wake of Anglo-Burmese war.

The Tai-Ahoms

The Ahoms, also known as the Tai-Ahoms, belongs to the group of Tai Shans, a great branch of Mongoloid population of Asia that migrated from Mong-Mao to the Brahmaputra Valley through the South Eastern Corner in the early Part of the 13th Century. They are the westernmost of the Tai speaking people. The historical documents of the Ahom record that they came to the North-eastern India in the early part of the thirteenth century AD from Mong Mao that bordered the South-western region of China and Northern Myanmar. They came originally via mainland Southeast Asia, where at present Thais form the most numerous and most widespread of the indigenous population. They are believed to be the descendants of a group of Tai speakers who migrated from the Hukawng Valley located on the upper reaches of the Chindwin River in present-day Myanmar at the beginning of the thirteenth century across the Patkai Range to a location in the upper Brahmaputra River Basin, in Northeastern India.

> *'One of those groups, under the leadership of Su-ka-pha, crossed the Patkai hills in Eastern India, entered Assam and after successfully overpowering the local aborigines, established a kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley. This group was later known as the Tai Ahom people, as being called by the locals. They ruled Assam for about six hundred years (1228AD-1826AD)"*[42]. (Buragohain, p.2)

Bara (1980, p.2063) also mentions that few hundred of Ahoms who

> *'had belonged to the main wave of immigrants from the Southern part of China ultimately crossed the Patkai Hills in the beginning of the 13th century and with Sukapha at the head settled down in the plains washed by the three tributaries of the Brahmaputra namely, the Dihing, the Disang and the Dikhou."*

The Ahoms had to face stiff resistance from the local kings and the tribal chiefs trying to establish their rule, first, in Upper Assam. At that time Lower Assam was under the Koch kings, while a considerable part of what is today called south Assam was ruled by the Cachari kings. It was only in the 17th century that the Ahoms clearly established their supremacy over the other kings or chiefs in the Brahmaputra valley and drove the Cachari kings to further south of Brahmaputra valley. By 1238 the Ahom chief, Sukapha, had consolidated his rule over the territory between the Luhit and the Disoi.

[42] Refer to http://www.jseals.org/seals21/buragohain11issuesd.pdf.

The Ahoms conquered Assam in the early thirteenth century A.D., and held it, as the ruling nation, for many centuries. Found in many large and small groups, there are six Tai families in the Northeast India namely *Ahom*, *Phake*, *Khamti, Turung, Aitan and Khamyang*. Nath[43] (p.3) mentions that out of these, the *Ahoms* habitating Assam, 'signify a class of people bold, cultured and assimilative so much so that the territory they occupied came to be known as Assam which has derived from the word Ahom according to many scholars.' It is one of the derivative for the nomenclature of the land now known as Assam and has serious value in the identity movement asserted by the Ahom group. This group that once ruled Assam and is credited to be the architect of Assam is today mostly scattered in areas comprising the districts of Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, and Sibsagar of Upper Assam.

The Ahoms spoke a language which was part of the Tai family. Although they maintained their language, political institutions and culture for centuries, The Ahoms followed the policy of assimilation and through the adoption of the local language and intermarriage with the local people they helped social and political unification and contributed to the growth of the Assamese nationality. They contributed a lot to the development and use of the Assamese language and at large the Assamese culture as it is known today. But the credit for the development of Assamese culture does not belong solely to the Ahoms. The composite Assamese language and culture had developed through the fusion of various dialects and cultures of local communities long before the Ahoms came.

Sharma (1980, p.1321) terms the Ahom form of governance as a form of 'oriental despotism',

> *'wherein some 'noble' clans ruled with a king at the head who owed his powers to a large extent on the consent of the leaders of the aforementioned clans. In exchange for a little over an acre of land per householder, the subject peoples were organised into groups and khels which resembled in some ways the early 'Banner' system of the Manchus and depended primarily on labour service directly to the state.'*

However Bara (1980, p.2063) is critical of this idea of naming it 'oriental despotism' and writes that 'the dynastic principle was important but not decisive'. Titles

[43] Refer to Nath, http://inter-disciplinary.net/ati/diversity/pluralism/pl4/nath%20paper.pdf.

were often bestowed on the basis of quality. Another view associated with the Ahom identity has been put forward by Yasmin Saikia (2005). The author's argument is drawn from "Buranjis" or history chronicles which are different from what is known as modern history as it is mainly concerned with genealogies. They provide with a variety of images but not definite descriptions of groups. These chronicles doesn't answer who the Ahoms are, except as the followers of Sukapha, one of the rulers, who first migrated to Assam.

> '*The buranjis, however, do not identify Ahom as a community in precolonial Assam. In fact, the term "Ahom" is hardly ever mentioned in the texts. Additionally, in the buranjis, the geography of the Assam kingdom is an undefined area and is simply referred to as the swargadeo's domain'.* (Saikia 2006, p.36)

With the help of the Buranjis, the author sets out to give an alternate definition of the category known as the Ahoms. There is an ambiguity associated with the term Ahom, as the Ahoms were not a specific group identity but positions connected to a place. It was a title given to the masses as a reward to motivate and hence they were the King's men. It can be regarded as one of the measure of state building by the Ahoms with the acquisition of territory and new groups of people, including them in the fold of Ahomness leading to further expansion. It is difficult to understand the Ahom identity when such a perspective is taken into account. It is not as simple that it seems to be as when it is considered as an ethnic group by many, a group that had migrated from southeast Asia. The class of Ahom nobles didn't have any affinity to their ethnic backgrounds, nor were they a class of hereditary aristocrats. Ahoms were a much more dynamic group than that, as they were made up at the behest and desire of the Swargadeo or King. Class and family background mattered nothing at all in the selection of nobles. Swargadeos never claimed to be Ahoms or to be become Ahom; however they designated who could be and could not be Ahom. Thus the category called Ahom and Assamese appears to be a construction by the colonial administrators. According to Saikia[44], the term Ahom was introduced by Walter Hamilton-Buchannan and became a colonial discourse in the early 19th century. The

[44] Borrowing from the myths of Ahom origin compiled by J.P. Wade, the first British resident in Assam, Walter Hamilton-Buchannan introduced the term Ahom in the *East India Gazetteer* in 1828. He claimed that originally a group of Shan warriors led by a mythical godlike figure called Sukapha came to Assam in 1228 and established an Ahom kingdom and the later swargadeos were valorized for mitigating differences and generating a combined polity in an ever expanding domain**.** Refer to http://www.india-seminar.com/2005/550/550%20yasmin%20saikia.htm.

colonial documents were responsible for creating a particular memory of the past that connected the Ahoms or the history of Assam to Upper Burma. This colonial version of migration of a community to Assam and creation of a composite Assamese culture was readily accepted proving the colonial power of myth making. Whether there really exist an 'Ahom' community or was it a distortions of the colonial reading of old Buranjis need to be examined. According to the Buranjis, swargadeo's[45] Ahom officers were a blended community constituting Naga, Kachari, Nora, Garo, Mikir, Miri, and even Goriya (Muslim). This history of the hybrid Ahom was overlooked by the British when they came to Assam. Unable to read the original chronicles, along with the discovery of Tai language buranjis led the colonial administers to concluded that the large number of king's men belonged to one community, a 'foreign' group had migrated from the hills of Burma into Assam, established an Ahom kingdom, and used the buranji literature to record their history and culture. This view of who constitutes the group of Ahom becomes important at the present times where there is a revival of age old culture by the group and a tendency to achieve a separate status from the so called 'Assamese' people.

The Ahom kingdom

The Ahom, after establishing their kingdom by forcing numerous indigenous people into submission eventually came to dominate the valley area south of the Brahmaputra and east of the River Dikho. At first, they had the headquarter of their kingdom at Charaideo in 1253 and later duing the rule of king Suhungmung Svarga Narayanai (1497-1539), Bakata, on the bank of the river Dihing, became the capital of their kingdom. In the late 1520s, the entire Chutiya kingdom was included into the Ahom kingdom. The boundary of the Kachari domain was pushed back further to the south-west after the Ahoms captured the Dhanasiri valley of the Kacharis. Garhgaon, situated at the bank of the river Dikho in the south of Brahmaputra, became the new capital of the consolidated Ahom kingdom. The Ahom kingdom maintained cultural and religious interactions with other neighbouring as well as far off kingdoms and thus was not a region that remained aloof from the rest of 'India'. Even in the midst of such interactions it kept its sovereignty intact by ably resisting and protecting their kingdom from the Mughal and other

[45] Title of the Tai-Ahom king.

invasions. However, at times the Sultans did attain temporary success over the kingdoms in the northeastern part of the country.

Artisans, scholars and other religious persons were invited quite often and migration was encouraged under the patronage of the Ahom rulers. During the middle age of the Ahom rule, the rulers converted themselves to Hinduism, like the Koch and Cachari kings and took Hindu names, alongside their Tai names. With due course of time, The Brahmins came to exercise enormous influence on the ruling elite and the introduction of the caste system in Assam is attributed to them. Assam also had a considerable Muslim population as many Muslim prisoners captured during wars married and settled in Assam.

The Ahoms, though belonging to a foreign land, eventually won over the existing kingdoms of the area and successfully managed to establish their rule over the whole of Brahmaputra valley. The various challenges to their rule hadn't died down completely and they continued facing the revolts of various tribes seeking independence. The greatest challenge however came in the form of the Vaishnavite movement of the 15th and 16th centuries. The downfall of the Ahom kingdom started its journey with the coming of this religious as well as "feudal" system. In the hope of strengthening their rule, the Ahoms imported and used many Brahmins and other intellectuals of Indian feudalism, mostly from Bengal and Kanauj. The immigrant intellectuals who in their turn swelled the Sanskritising tide made valuable contributions towards statecraft, diplomacy, revenue organisation, ideology and military science, but the relations of production were not sufficiently feudalised till the end. It resulted in a long drawn out series of civil wars with the majority of peasants and the new developing feudal forces from below on one side and the Ahom tribal oligarchy and its loyal retainers on the other.

The end of the 18th century saw a series of internal contradictions within the ruling class of the Ahoms. Religious wars, palace intrigues and misrule further weakened the Ahom authority and paved the way for Burmese invasions. At about the same time even the Cachari kingdom was in a crisis due to the Manipuri conquest and the Burmese intervention. From 1822 to 1826 the whole of Assam was virtually under the occupation of the Burmese invaders. Taking advantage of the political crises in the region, the British

intervened in the name of restoring peace and authority. After the victory of the British army over the Burmese invaders, the Yandaboo Treaty was concluded with the Burmese general in 1826 and Assam became a part of the colonial project. Puppet kings were reinstated by the British in Cachar and upper Assam. In later periods other hilly areas in the north-east, inhabited by tribal people, were also brought under the British rule, while the entire region was placed under the administrative umbrella of Bengal Presidency. In 1874 the British, for administrative convenience, carved out a separate Chief Commissionership of Assam. It covered, along with the erstwhile areas under the rule of the Ahom and the Cachari kings, the adjoining hills inhabited by the Nagas, Kukis, Mizos, Garos, Jaintias and Khasis. The Yandaboo treaty only marked the beginning of the annexation and unification of the numerous small kingdoms of the region into what came to be known as the state of Assam and later the seven states of northeastern India. The British further reorganised the region to facilitate better administrative control. The Sylhet district in Bengal, which was never under the control of any Ahom or Cachari kings, was also merged to create Assam province. The British decision to incorporate Goalpara, Cachar and Sylhet districts, inhabited by the Bengali population, into the Assam province created problems for both the Bengalis as well as the Assamese at a later date. With the annexation of Assam by the colonial power, Assam's sovereignty came to an end and with it the monarchy that had continued for six hundred years. In the early buranjis, the connection between Upper Burma and Assam is repeatedly invoked through myths and legends of shared heroes, religion, and customs, as well as royal exchanges of gifts and emisaries. Yet Upper Burma is rendered absent from the Tai-Ahom ancestral tree. Though this shift is not documented, one possible reason can be the British occupation of Assam. When British annexed Assam and included it in the British occupied India, the historic linkages between Assam and its easterly neighbors were undermined and histories of crossroads were forgotten.

Policy of Assimilation

The Ahoms followed a policy of assimilation with the local people which turned out to be the principle reason for the disappearance of the language and customs of the Ahoms later. Largely spoken in South-east Asia, the Tai family of languages is considered to be

one of the most important cultural mediums in this region. Its numerous speakers are spread in a considerably vast area - extending from Assam to Kwangsi and Kwangtung, to the island of Hainan, from Laos and Thailand to the border of Tibet, including the Yun-nan province of China. The Ahoms spoke an old form of the Tai language, belonging to the Tai-Kadai family. Though there exist considerable literature in the language, this branch of the Tai language is on the verge of extinction[46]. Tai Ahom is no longer the mother tongue of the Ahoms who speak the Assamese language now, although other Tai languages in Assam are still in use. The use of Tai Ahom language is now limited only to the religious ceremonies and prayer songs still performed by the Ahom priestly class. Terwiel, an anthropologist from Thailand, records that, '[a]lready at the beginning of the nineteenth century its use was limited to a small priestly class, who derived a measure of status from being able to read ancient documents and chant them aloud'. (1989, p.125)

In Assam, the Tai Ahoms came in contact with the different races with their diverse languages, for instance, Kachari, Chutiya, Moran, Miri, Lalung, and so on. The first Ahom king Su-ka-pha successfully assimilated all these local aborigines together in order to build his vast kingdom. Instead of imposing their language on these people, they acknowledged the local language and culture and even contributed towards it. The most remarkable outcome of this linguistic and cultural assimilation is the development of the Assamese language. The Assamese language received an equally significant status as that of the Tai Ahom language in the royal court and from 16th century onwards Tai historians started writing their manuscript in both the languages. The strong influence of Assamese resulted in the gradual disappearance of the Tai Ahom language. The Ahom rule served as a catalyst for intermixing of local languages. It is quite natural to find Tai Ahom words and expressions in Assamese prose to the extent that the enormous vocabulary of current Assamese language is abundant with numerous Tai Ahom words. The Tai language has richly contributed to the vocabulary of the Assamese language. With time, the strong influence of the Assamese language itself led to the decline of the Tai language. The significance of the Tai Ahom language lies mainly in the fact that the glorious 600 years long Ahom rule (1228 AD-1826 AD) and the history of Assam is written and

[46] Refer to Grierson (1904, p.13).

documented in this language. The Ahom language continued among the Ahoms till 15th century AD but later got confined to history writing and other religious affairs. Gradually, the Ahoms became bilinguals with the constant influence of the local languages, mainly the Assamese language. From 16th century onwards, the development of Assamese language started dominating the Ahom court as well as the common household of Assamese people. This has significantly resulted in the issues of language shift and language change. The Tai language has its own writing system, and it is rich in the historical account of ancient Assam, which forms the splendour of Assamese literature.

> *'The medium of communication and of literary works was Ahom since the reign of Su-ka-pha. From the time of the fourth Ahom king, the language started fading away slowly. By the time of the fifth Ahom king, Assamese language came into being – functioning both as an official language and a layman's common spoken form. By the advent of Shankardev (16th century AD) and his Vaisnavite movement, Assamese came in the forefront while Tai Ahom took a backseat forever'.* (Buragohain, p.3)

The Hinduisation of the Ahoms is one of the principal reasons behind their inclination towards the Assamese language. The process of Hinduisation started during the beginning of the17th century AD, when Rudra Singha was the Ahom king. With the influence of the Hinduisation process the Ahom rulers started acquiring Hindu names besides their Tai Ahom names. The period also saw rise of Hindu customs and rituals and a decline in the Ahom religious ceremonies minimizing the differences between the Ahoms and the local communities.

The Ahoms who had migrated, being limited in numbers, as part of diplomatic political strategy, gave the local people their stately esteem and grade by employing them in different regal affairs in order to facilitate the creation of an Ahom empire. This indeed proved fruitful as 'the Ahom king won the hearts of the local people by showing high esteem to the local language with its practice in royal interactions'. (ibid., pp. 4) Assamese, in due course of time became an important language in daily usage as well as in the matters of the court and finally got firmly rooted in place of the Ahom language. The acceptance and enhancement of the Assamese language by the Ahoms further helped Assamese language to root firmly. Gradually, the influence of the Tai Ahom language

began declining. Apart from this, Buragohain mentions intermarriage and complexity of the Tai language as another reason for the disappearance of the Ahom language. When the Ahoms migrated to the new land, they brought along a very few Tai women with him and hence intermarriage with the local communities was encouraged. The new generation hardly knew the language and naturally, the influence of the Ahom language began declining among the next generation. The Ahom language is tonal and monosyllabic in nature which makes it a complex one. Also, the difficult phonetic system of the language was responsible for the Ahoms to get interested in a comparatively simple and toneless Assamese language. The commoners also preferred a relatively simple and toneless Assamese language to the complicated tonal Tai Ahom language. And with time, the Ahom language is now on the verge of extinction. It is natural that the Assamese vocabulary is also full of many Ahom words that are used in the exchange of simple conversation. Some of those words are incorporated directly in Assamese and others either being some broken words or being compounded.

With each passing generation embracing the Assamese language, the Tai Ahom language became inconceivable to the young people. Now it is accessible only to a few hundreds of them. There is also a considerable amount of language variation seen in the language in the present scenario. Also, there are different varieties of the speech dialects now being practiced and taught among these speakers and new learners. As the sense of language revival has grown recently, there is a lot of debate going on in order to determine the original speech and its rules. However, this has only given way to a possible study and exploration of the vast arena of sociolinguistic matters regarding the Tai Ahom language.

The field of language was only one of the contributions made by this new community that came all the way from China. They also brought along with them the tradition of writing history[47] and a new system of administration.

> *'The Ahoms sincerely maintained chronicles describing the reigns of different Ahom kings (or swargadeu) in terms of various historical manuscripts (or buranji) and different other literary works. Two types of historical manuscripts are generally found – (a) the genealogy of royal families and the regal affairs*

[47] Refer to Gait (2008, p.1).

were documented in royal historical scripts (raj buranji), and (b) the chronological account of Ahom families was recorded in specific manuscripts called bankhawali, which are being written till present.' (Buragohain, pp.3)

Besides these records, other important books and documents on philosophy, technology, medicinal remedies, etc too were present during the Ahom period. In order to get access of these significant books and records, proper knowledge and a graspable understanding of the language is certainly inevitable. It is precisely for this reason that there has been a rise in the awareness of the almost extinct Ahom language. Without proper documenting, these chronicles too will die out one day, taking the rich history of Assam and the rule of the Ahoms along with it.

Teriwiel (1996, p.276) observes that the conditions that led to the abandonment of much of the traditional Ahom culture was created by 'the very military and political successes that are so proudly remembered by present-day Ahom'. The case of Tai Ahom is an example of the disappearance of the distinct identity of the invaders in a foreign land due to its assimilation into and further development of local (Assamese) language and culture. However, there is still hope of a revival of the Tai Ahom language due to its historical importance. When an endangered language is spoken in a culture whose historical significance is widely appreciated, it most possibly provokes widespread concern. The revival of the Ahom language is a good example of it. Being the language of the royal court of Assam during the Ahom reign, the Tai Ahom language was widely used as the written medium of all historical texts and manuscripts of ancient Assam. Therefore, revival of the language is more important as well as relevant for historians in order to explore the golden era of the Ahom kings. Preserving an endangered language is to preserve a culture as a language represents the cultural identity of an individual, or a community.

An Alternate Tai-Ahom Identity

Identities in the northeastern region of India exhibits a picture of overlapped identity to the outsiders and at the same time the ethnic groups put forward and then at other times keep in abeyance their strong identity markers. The case of the Tai-Ahoms is a classic

one in this sense. The Ahoms and the Assamese can be seen as a 'seamless' portrait[48]. Until 1931, the Ahom were classified in the Indian Census as a special subcaste however the modern Indian census donot include any separate classification of 'Ahom'. The non-recognition of the 'Ahom' as a category in the Indian Census reflects the official point of view that considers the Ahom lowland Hindu Assamese. This kind of view has been contested by various Ahom spokesmen. The attempt of the tai-Ahoms to bring back their past or lost culture can be seen as revivalism.

In the previous section the downfall of the Ahom kingdom has been already discussed. The plight of the community did not end with the loss of their sovereignty. With the end of the imperial rule, they fell prey to the hegemony and nation building process of the Indian state. This normalising and exclusionist historical force was not acceptable to the conscious sections of the Tai-Ahoms since independence. As soon as India became independent, the first ever ethnic organisation in Assam, the All Assam Ahom Sabha was set up on the 13th of May, 1893 to instigate a separate political settlement for the Ahoms. It is. It was organised by the stalwart of Assamese literature Padmanath Gohainbarua and the first session was held at erstwhile Rangpur known as Sivasagar now a days. He happened to be the president of the 1941 session too and the presidential Address reflected the demand for a separate electorate for the Ahoms[49]. The Sibsagar District Ahom Association held at Amguri, Sibsagar too adopted a Resolution that talks of the agitation of The All Assam Ahom Association for the establishment of a separate sovereign state of Assam.

According to Nath, the Ahoms demand for a separate status and not a separate territory. The Ahom and non-Ahom cultural markers are so incorporated with each other to form the Assamese culture that they are almost inseparable. Devoid of separatist tendencies, their struggle is one of restructuring/reconfiguring the Tai-Ahom tag in the changing perspective. The present-day Tai-Ahom seeks to establish a memory and history connecting Assam with Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, and also demand inclusion within modern India as a Scheduled Tribes (ST) group. Though statistically

[48] Refer to Nath, http://inter-disciplinary.net/ati/diversity/pluralism/pl4/nath%20paper.pdf, p.2.

[49] Refer to Nath, http://inter-disciplinary.net/ati/diversity/pluralism/pl4/nath%20paper.pdf, p.2.

small in number, those claiming to be Tai-Ahom in spite of being within the fold of Assamese have raised a salient question concerning Indian history and identity. In the words of Saikia (2006, p.35)

> *'Instead of accepting the label Hindu and Indian as their primary identity markers and the textbook version of Indian history as their past, the Tai-Ahom are challenging the epistemological and geographical limits of Indian history and dismantling the inherited colonial historiography of the frontiers, seeking to move beyond the limited nationalist narratives to open a space for dialogue between Delhi and Bangkok.'*

This, they hope, will enable them to overcome the history of silences and disempowerment and launch a new beginning as a defined community with an identity at the crossroads of Assam.

Narratives and Cultural Symbols

The previous chapter has already dealt with the Assamese identity and Tai-Ahom influence in it. Many festivals, rituals, narratives, cultural symbols that are now accepted as markers of Assamese society are sought to be reinforced as part of Tai-Ahom traditions.

Nath looks at narratives and cultural symbols to analyze the revival of the Tai-Ahom identity. The Narratives that are being used for narrativising the Tai-Ahom struggle are comprised of myths, legends, stories, folk tales, songs, beliefs, community songs etc which are 'independent' but have been turned into part of a 'discourse'. For the advocates of the Tai-Ahom struggle, these are useful in producing

> *'an alternative identity marker for this ethnic group who are/have been/thought and felt to be at the periphery because of perceived dislocations as a result of the normalizing forces of a grand narrative comprised of the governmental position of India and the established Assamese nationalism.'* (ibid., p.4)

Cultural Symbols in the form of festivals, rituals, and customs both religious and secular, belief systems, organizations – political and non-political formed for the advancement/coherence of a particular society/ethnic group or community. All of these may or may not be the means to creating or restoring identity but nonetheless does mark the distinctness of a group and can sometimes become instrumental in foregrounding the

desired identity. This is nothing but a re-writing of the 'script' put forward by the dominant culture.

The reclaim of identity by the Tai-Ahoms is also in a way a reclaim of their history. The narratives comprising legends, myths, stories, popular tales etc are found interspersed in the histories or Buranjis with varying degrees of focus on particular topics or points of loci depending on authors from time to time and prevailing socio-political conditions. These narratives, whether factual or coloured with imagination, are rooted in history to a great extent. For Nath (p.5)**,**

> *'the mythical/legendary postulations regarding the origin of the Tai-Ahoms offer interesting 'sites' of contestations that would open up illuminating vistas of this struggle since some of the vital claims of this ethnicity are being derived from these creation myths as well. They provide ideological justifications to the ways of administering the country by the Ahom kings some of the customs of which are still prevalent in this community thereby equipping them with distinct cultural markers. The controversial issues like the courageous missions of Joymoti and Lachit Borphukon also are treated/not treated or rather appropriated by different scholars at different times, for example; a study of which reveals a process of 'consciousness-raising'.'*

The incorporation of new materials by the later historians have been influenced by discovery of authentic evidences as well as by creative imagination entering the peoples' mind through literary productions like plays, novels, popular ballads and songs.

In such a context, the advocates of Ahom struggle offer oppositional voices in order to reclaim and strengthen their identity. The earlier histories of Assam that have been accepted as authentic are criticised by scholars[50] for not including incidents and characters from Ahom period that have achieved myth like statures. The silencing of Ahom heroes[51] while writing the history of Assam is one way of creating a history or

[50] Refer to Nath, p.5, http://inter-disciplinary.net/ati/diversity/pluralism/pl4/nath%20paper.pdf.

[51] Gait's 'A History of Assam' mentions nothing about the beheading of Lachit Borphukon's maternal uncle in the same way as Suryya Kumar Bhuyan is silent about the same incident in his exclusive article on Lachit Borphukon published in 'Studies in the History of Assam.' Benudhar Sarma mentions it casually and S.L. Barua's work 'A Comprehensive History of Assam' refers to it quoting an unpublished chronicle. The same line of omissions and interpolations are also to be found in case of Joymoti. While Gait is silent again about the Joymoti episode, there are scanty information provided by S.K.Bhuyan and S.L. Barua. N.N. Acharyya is a little elaborative about this event. If one looks at these and many other historical narratives chronologically, one finds additional information in subsequent times. Refer to Nath, p. 5.

memory that do not allow for a separate imagination of the Ahom community and are seen as one with the Assamese. 'Buranjis' are an important source of information for Saikia (2005) but naming these Buranjis or history chronicles is an area of contestation as they are mainly concerned with genealogies. These are powerful tool, the actors also being the narrators.

Secondly, literary productions based on historical facts also contribute to the mission of 'reclaiming identity' by strengthening popular memory not only among the particular group but also among the other communities of the society. These consist of plays, novels, poems, ballads etc. Ahoms are trying to reclaim the identity through

> *'plays like Joymoti (1900) Gadadhar (1907), Sadhani (1910) and Lachit Barphukan (1915) by Padmanath Gohainbarau; Lakshminath Bezbarua followed him and produced Chakradhwaj Singha (1915), Joymoti Kunwari (1915), and Belimar (1915). Other playwrights that deserve mention who could recreate the memory of the past were Radha Kanta Handique, Nakul Chandra Bhuyan, Sailadhar Rajkhowa, Prasanalal Chaudhury, Deivachandra Talukdar, Dandinath Kalita, Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya, Dulal Chandra Barthakur, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Uttam Barua, Suren Bhagawati, etc. There are a whole lot of novels like Bhanumoti (1891), Lahori (1892) both by Padmanath Gohainbarua, and Padum Kunwari(1891) by Lakshminath Bezbarua. Dandinath Kalita, Dhruba Jyoti Bora, Krishna Baru, Madhurima Barua, Nabakanta Barua, Devendranath Acharyya, Troilokya Bhattacharyya etc. Apart from these, poems and ballads on Joymoti Kunwari, Lachit Borphukon, Moniram Dewan, Peoli Phukon and others are prevalent in Assam'.* (Nath, pp.5)

Literature goes a long way to substantiate in the mind of the Assamese psyche the memory of the Ahom dynasty that has been instrumental in strengthening the case of the identity movement. It is to be noted here that popular memory in some cases becomes more powerful among the people than the facts revealed by serious academic studies.

While the Ahoms built a greater Assam and Assamese culture, they lost their distinctiveness and this distinctiveness is now asserted by many in the Ahom community through their festivals Lankuri, pufis, Ai-nang, Furalung etc and rituals like Ompha, Me-Dam Me-phi, Chaklong, Sum-cheng, Sci-pha, Saik-Kar, Dam Puja, re-enacting animal sacrifice, erecting cult buildings[52]. The production of the Phra Lung religion gives form and shape to the politics and discourse of the Tai-Ahom identity movement. Within the

[52] Refer to Nath, http://inter-disciplinary.net/ati/diversity/pluralism/pl4/nath%20paper.pdf.

Tai-Ahom movement Phra Lung religious and cultural production occupied a central place. The new religion was largely influential in creating a proactive politics for establishing the Tai-Ahom as separate from the Assamese and by extension Indians, while transcending the limited state history to forge new alliances with people and cultures in Thailand. Phra Lung combines elements of Tantric Hinduism with Thai Buddhism and local ancestor worship. By exploring the connections between Phra Lung and Tai-Ahom, Saikia engages the vexing issues of the connections between religion and identity politics that make it possible for followers to experience a new kind of border crossing, connecting the people in Assam with political and intellectual agendas in process in Thailand. By asserting a history of connection with neighbors in Southeast Asia and constructing a new hybrid religion, groups such as the Tai-Ahom contest the bounded Indian identity emanating from the central state in Delhi. In turn, they are using the site of Phra Lung to make a recognizable collective to challenge the national Indian Hindu identity and cross the borders of the state to formulate a transborder Tai-Ahom identity for reviving and facilitating the meetings of several different states and people at the crossroads of Assam.

Ahom Organisations

The Tai-Ahoms have worked towards reviving their identity by various means such as establishing the Ahom Sabha, designing Ahom alphabet, setting up Tai language schools and in some instances incorporating practices from Thailand. The political situation of Assam, i.e. rise of Indian National Congress was seen as ascendency of Hindu power in Assam by the Ahom politicians. Ahom association was formed as a protest to the rise of caste Hindu power. It is a politics of recognition. Serious interest has been aroused for renewed study on areas like Ahom script, Ahom language and the myths and stories of creation. The leaders of this movement have adopted many academic agendas including establishment of Research Institutes, Museums, reading ancient manuscripts, reviving some of the traditional rituals that have become obsolete in time.

> *'The trend is definitely because of emergence of certain organizations. Nath mentions the emergence of many other organizations followed with the chief objective of protecting the Ahom cause. "These include, apart from All Assam Ahom Sabha (1893), All Assam Ahom Association (1910), All Assam Ahom*

Students Federation (1944), The Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam (1955), All Assam Mohan Deodhai Bailung Sanmillan (1962), All Assam Tai Students Association (1964), Ahom Tai Mongoliya Rajya Parishad (1967), Purbanchal Tai Sahitya Sabha (1981), All Ahom Students Union (1988), The Tai Ahom Council (1987) etc. These organizations have been pursuing agendas that have led to considerable awakening among the people with regard Ahom revivalism. What is noticeable is the fact that the methods adopted by these organizations are many, all contributing to the chief cause of creating a definite space for the Tai-Ahoms'. (Nath, pp.3-4)

By christening the coming generation with Tai-Ahom tag, modifying their old names in an effort to display their Ahomness, particularly in case of occasions where the cause of Tai-Ahom identity is concerned, the members of the Tai-Ahom identity struggle incorporate original Ahom ways in the day to day life. Celebration of Tri-Centenary of Rangpur, and Rangpur Festival also points to the same direction.

Phases in the Identity Struggle

The disappearance of the Tai language, Buranjis is a crucial juncture as traces of unattractive past was removed by burning Buranjis. Buranjis became decontextualised and transformed from narratives of heroes into artifacts of identity construction. These chronicles were used for this purpose in the recent Tai-Ahom identity movement. This movement is not a recent phenomenon but has continued since the pre-independence times in various forms. One important change is the attempt of the contemporary Tai-Ahom leaders to create a fixed Ahom space and delink it from the rest of Assam. The leaders claim the Luit valley as a Tai-Ahom space and the historic domain of the swargadeo. Ahom as a memory and a politics resurfaced in Assam in the 1940s and, again, in the 1960s.

The Ahoms had its kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley. Even in the identity struggle, the river Brahmaputra has a significant position in the form of Luit and the population of Luitpaar. Several strands of 'emotions, politics, culture, and society reflect the construction of Luitpaar that is taking place in Ujani Aham and in the discourse of a Tai-Ahom identity' (Saikia 2005, p.148). The current construction of Luitpaar and Tai-Ahom consists of loose collection of stories and traditions. The Tai-Ahom movement is seen as a control over their resource and land, recognizing the Luit, and being citizen of

Luitpaar. It also involves a lingering hope to find a shared emotional 'home' with their Tai counterparts outside and beyond Assam, as well as in modern Thailand based on the 'old' Buranjis. Ordinary everyday experiences are made extraordinary through conscious political and social efforts, and a popular discourse of Tai-Ahom is generated. The incidents that developed during the Indo-China war of 1962, mainly the Indian state's inability to protect its northeastern border brought back the nostalgia of a secured past. The Indian state gained a negative image in the eyes of the people of Assam. Subsequent to the negative feelings about the Indian state and the 'memory of being abandoned by the Indian government' troubled many in Upper Assam raising a new wave of reaction. 'Politics, particularly under the banner of the Ahom leaders, became strident, and Ahom became both a rhetorical tool and an ethical issue to persuade the masses of Upper Assam to disassociate themselves from India' (Saikia 2006, p.42). The search for an Assamese identity and sovereignty and the unfolding process of Tai-Ahom politics in a way led to the emergence of ULFA, the military organisation that radicalised the people of Upper Assam area. Early 1960s saw the emergence of the Assamese identity movement, which was continued by the ULFA where violence became a tool of protest against the Indian state.

The overwhelming influence of Bengali culture in the British occupied Assam resulted in the rise of Assamese nationalist sentiment aiming at a free and mutually recognizable Assamese identity for all those residing in Assam. Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani Sabha (ABUS) was formed in 1989 in Calcutta (present Kolkata) with the objective of developing Assamese as one of the richest language in the world. In its journal 'Jonaki' contributors focused on Assam's glorious past and the old kingdom of Kamrup was seen as an inspiration. The idea of an 'independent Assam' gained momentum with the contributions made in the journal and 'Swadhin Asom', i.e. independent Assam, came to be seen as the answer to the all the misfortunes that Assam was going through. This was however, not convincing to the majority in Upper Assam. Quickly, a new leadership opposing the platform of Assamese identity emerged under the banner of Ahom in 1893 claiming the slogan of 'Swadhin Asom' as a rhetoric that was not directed at freeing Assam from India. Instead it was a desperate attempt to situate Assam within India. The emergence of associations such as Asamiya Bhasha Unnati-

Sadhani Sabha (Assamese Language Improvement Society), Assam Desh-Itihasi Sabha (Assam History Society, 1890s), and Assam Sahitya Sabha (Assam Literary Society, 1917) only added to the fear that caste Hindu groups would dominate politics in Assam and situate the Assamese within India, rather than separate from it. The Association saw the Ahoms as non-Indians and generated a racial politics of Mongoloid people. In their effort to resist the Hinduisation of Assam they called for the support of other communities such as the Kacharis, Muttocks, Deuris, etc[53]. History was seen as the most important tool to actualise Ahom claims for separation from caste Hindus.

The colonial administrator and historians placed the Assamese people outside the lineage of Aryans, excluding them from high-caste Hindu history and thus identity. The image of Assam 'as at the edge of Hindu civilization' was sustained by representing the people as peripheral, low communities. Under the influence of the INC there was a sudden and parochial desire for Assamese to proclaim their Hinduness. However, it only broadened the distance of the Assamese with other communities of the state. The Ahoms rejected the INC and severed their relationship with Assamese politics. Assamese became a term synonymous with the '*caste Hindus*' of the valley. 'Upper/Ujani/eastern' Assam was claimed to be a space separate from the 'Lower/Namoni/western Assam' and exclusively for the Ahoms by the Ahom leaders. These Ahom leaders claimed for a separate 'Ahomstan' in Upper Assam. This demand continued till the end of the colonial period and got supported by the Muslims of Upper Assam as well as by many other groups. The inclusion of Assam within the Indian union in 1947 led to political strife and discontent and even boycott of Independence Day celebration by The Ahom groups[54].

With more and more influence of Hinduism in Assam, the Ahoms suffered a low status and in Upper Assam, Ahom served as a rhetoric and symbol to organize the dispossessed, outcaste communities. It was an attempt to keep alive the memory of the swargadeo's rule as the 'golden days of Assam'. Nonetheless, the newly formulated collective memory of the past did not lead to massive changes, even within Upper Assam.

[53] Refer to Saikia (2006, p. 40).
[54] The Ahom Students Association at Jorhat contacted their Burmese counterparts for help to continue the movement against Indianization (Ahom Association, file 362, Assam State Archive). Refer to Saikia(2006, p. 42).

Most people viewed Ahom as a symbol of the past and recognised themselves as Assamese bound together by a shared language.

The revival of tai-Ahom identity is also a means to deal with the problem of the dominant Assamese caste Hindus. While struggling for gaining a separate identity, the Tai-Ahoms have tried to bring the cause of other tribes too. In 1944, the Ahom Sabha (Ahom Association) united all of Assam's ethnic minorities in an All-Assam Tribes and Races Federation. The Tai Historical and Cultural Society of Assam was founded in 1954, at a meeting of Ahom people at Patsaku of Sibsagar District and even brought out its own journal, Lik Phan Tai in 1966. This organization linked the Ahom with other Tai groups such as the Khamti, Khamyang, Phakey, and Aiton. The Tai Mongol Association, with its headquarters in Jorhat could gather the interest of the Ahom people. The All-Assam Ahom Association merged with the All-Assam Tai Sabha in 1964.

The year 1967 saw the reorganisation of Assam, i.e. its division of into hills and plains states. This was seen as an opportunity by the Ahom leaders to mark their separateness and they petitioned the Indian government to recognize them as a community distinct from the Assamese. In October 1967, the 'Ahom Tai Mongolia Parishad' was formed by dissolving the 'Ahom-Tai Rajya Parishad', 'Ahom Sabha', and 'Mongoloid National Front' into one body that demanded a separate Mongolian state to be formed in Upper Assam for the Ahom-Tais and the various other tribes[55]. It sent a petition to India's Prime Minister demanding a separate Ahom state or a federated unit comprising the district of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur in upper Assam reflecting the idea of a separately governed Upper Assam. Arguing in favour of recognition of a distinct Tai Ahom identity, the organisation also send lengthy memorandum devoted to a survey of the glorious past of the Ahoms where they were recognised as a legal party by the British in the Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826. They consider the preservation of their distinct language, script or culture as a constitutional right provided by the constitution of India. The authors of the Memorandum also drew attention to studies of the Ahom script and language. Culturally, they describe the Ahom as 'one of the tribes of Mongolian origin and observe that these peoples in general still retain their original religious faiths, beliefs, and

[55] Refer to Saikia (2006, p.42).

customs, such as the brewing of rice beer, the wearing of distinctive clothing and the observance of a particular Ahom form of marriage'. (Terwiel 1996, p.279)

In spite of all the efforts their demand was not accepted and Ahom continued to be part of the Hindu Assamese and were only classified as a backward Hindu community. In 1968 an attempt to create the boundaries of Ahomness led to a renewed invocation of Southeast Asian roots.

On October 17, 1981, the International Tai Studies Conference was held in New Delhi which provided a meeting ground for the Ahom and Thai scholars to draft a common agenda to explore their 'shared' identity. It provided the much needed opportunity to the Tai-Ahom identity struggle to increase connectivity of the Ahoms with the Southeast Asian cultures and community and integration of Upper Assam area with Southeast Asia to overcome the restrictive powers of Indians, Hindus, and Assamese. Scholars presented views that for an effective Ahom politics, cultural orientation of Upper Assam needs to be radically transformed which included division between the Ahoms and the Assamese. The category called 'Ahom' in the buranjis that was rather ambiguous till then was revitalised through discussions and became a platform to challenge the Assamese identity movement that was in full form in the early 1980s. By associating Ahom history with Thai history and culture, the leaders of the Tai Ahom made their enterprise exotic and different from that of the Assamese. Moreover, the newly found connection with Thailand provided an impetus to mix and match different strands of religion, some kind of Buddhism with the newly minted Phra Lung rituals, and to demand ST status. The postcolonial state practice of economic neglect and the cultural marginality of Assam within India were both challenged by the obscure Ahoms with the help of Thai international support. The attraction for change was grounded in the realities of local economics promising control of land, resources, and political power for groups that were dispossessed and marginalized by Assamese-caste Hindu communities. A new organisation called the Ban Ok Publik Muang Tai (Eastern Tai Literary Society) and a new religion called Phra Lung was formed by group of activists to establish their difference from Assamese Hindus. Dietary habits were also changed to mark the departure from Hinduism. Beef, taboo among Hindus, became an integral part of the new Tai-Ahom diet, as did partaking of local alcohol called haj or lau pani. A new Tai-Ahom

community was created[56] combining the 'Assamese Ahom' and various Tai-speaking groups such as the Aiton, Phakey, Khamyang, Khamti, and Tuning in order to claim the new religion of Phra Lung. Ban Ok then claimed the total number of Ahom in Assam to be six hundred thousand, mostly concentrated in Upper Assam. The Ban Ok Publik Muang Tai has stimulated a large literary output in the form of language textbooks, popular history books, and publications in the unique Ahom script for use in religious services. Over the past twenty-five years, the Ahom have built various cult buildings for the performance of non-Hindu rites[57]. The Tai language and a mixture of Ahom, Phakey, Khamti and Central Thai have been included in many schools in Sibsagar and Dibrugarh Districts, including Dibrugarh University. A central representative building, named Chukafa (Suea Ka Pha) Nagar, in the Assamese capital have been constructed which serves as headquarters for the revivalist movement. Conferences and religious and political meetings are organised and also attended by huge audiences to bring about awareness of tai-Ahom identity.

The rise of the Tai-Ahom identity struggle has led to many new agendas of struggle in Upper Assam, the United Liberation Front of Assam being one which has become the dominant organization threatening the secession of Assam from India. The struggle of the Ahoms had also received political patronage, even if for a short period of time. The academic and cultural impetus for this movement was facilitated by the then chief minister, Hiteshwar Saikia, a self-proclaimed 'Ahom-Assamese'. Hiteshwar Saikia, who was the chief minister of Assam in 1991 inaugurated a new economy for Ahom and donated vast sums of money to make the Ahom a community. The publication industry of Ahom history and religion received a boost and celebrations to commemorate Ahom heroes and public worship intensified which created a new knowledge base about Ahom. Between 1990 and 1996, at the height of Saikia's political career, Tai-Ahom leaders received many benefits and made impressive strides toward making the Ahom a distinct community in Assam with linkages to Thai culture and people. After Saikia passed away in April 1996, however, Ban Ok lost its financial support. The end of this golden period

[56] Saikia (2006, p.43) argues that there was no formed group called Tai-Ahom readily available. So, the leaders of Ban Ok turned their attention to several Assamese groups in the heartland of Upper Assam, as well as small (Burmese) Tai communities.
[57] The Amlikhi Doesal was set up in Lakwa of Sibsagar, see page 279, Terwiel (1996).

in the history of the Tai-Ahom struggle was soon to be followed by the difficulties posed by the rise of Hindu nationalism under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The lack of financial support to pursue Tai-Ahom identity, coupled with the rising power of fundamentalist Hindu identity, slowed down the exchanges between the Ban Ok and Thai supporters and halted the growth and development of Phra Lung. Throughout the early 1990s, however, the leaders and supporters of Tai Ahom performed the critical task of revealing the restrictive limits of national identity and created a new patchwork of contingent labels and a local narrative linking Upper Assam with the Thai efforts to make Tai-Ahom part of a Pan-Thai identity. An active academic conversation about Tai-Ahom history and culture was generated and several conferences were organised in Assam and outside to facilitate the entrenchment of a Tai-Ahom memory among believers and scholars.

New festivals and commemorative events such as Sukapha dibah, Jaymoti dibah, Me-dem-me-phi, etc, were created and publicly celebrated as part of the identification of the community based on old and new customary practices. Religious celebrations such as Sukapha Divah (commemorating Sukapha), Me-dam-me-phi[58] (the placing of ancestral spirits) became a platform for the Ban Ok and the Phra Lung committee to give formal shape to Ahom identity and religion while Ahom household continued with their Hindu rituals in most cases. These ceremonies were performed temporary priests, laymen officiate as priests, and their impermanent position prevented any individual or group of individuals from becoming keepers of religion and gaining power. Most welcomed this change to dislodge the Brahmins and gosains. Conversion to Phra Lung took place at the behest of the deodhais of Patsako, with the support of Ban Ok. The conversion ceremony called Te-Te, is conducted at night, which entails a simple verbal commitment in Assamese to respect ancestors and elaborate worship is offered to ancestors during the occasion. In order to establish their difference from the caste Hindu Assamese, a ceremony called Hu-pat (killing a cow) is performed in the event of mass conversion that

[58] Sukapha Divah, which first took place in 1988, was one of the first Ahom public worship celebrations meant to establish ancestor worship as the main tenet of the Phra Lung religion. Among the Tai-Ahom ancestors, swargadeos were considered the most important and were now recognised as the forefathers of the present-day Tai-Ahoms. In 1991 the celebration of Me-dam me-phi was established as a public worship ceremony; since then, January 31 has been identified as the day for annual celebration.

has become the fine line differentiating 'real Tai-Ahoms' from 'Hindus claiming to be Tai-Ahom' but not without opposition from even those supporting separate Tai-Ahom identity. However, the process is interpreted by Saikia (2006, p.48) as a defiance of Hinduism.

> '*it is not hard to surmise that the rite of killing a cow to establish the conversion of former Hindu Tai-Ahom to practitioners of Phra Lung is in direct defiance of the Hindu belief about the sacrality of cows. For Phra Lung Tai-Ahoms, the rejection of Hinduism and the high caste Hindu customs were more important than providing meaning and definition of the new rites that were constructed in the process.'*

Throughout the 1990s, the construction of Phra Lung and Tai-Ahom was in process. Tai-Ahom was gaining ground and making claims as a historical community with linkages outside Assam and to India at large. The Tai-Ahom claim of belongingness to Southeast Asia facilitated the recognition of Thai input in contemporary Tai-Ahom politics and performance as a natural outcome. The Thai scholars too contributed to the Thai-Ahom connection story which generated a new level of construction and consumption of Tai-Ahom in Assam.

Fluid 'Border'

The Tai-Ahom identity is a fluid one. On the one hand it is said to have informed the greater Assamese identity, on the other hand it retains elements of its place of origin in southeast Asia. This has also influenced the identity revival struggle. Just like any other Tai groups, the Ahoms also possess a large number of Tai Literatures along with lots of Assamese literatures. They are histories, astrology, novels, folk-tales, Buddha jatakas, Buddhist religions manuscripts such as Tripitaka, Ramayana (Lamamang), Phung chin, Pu chon lan, Lan thin po, story of Taton-the trick star, folk stories like wicked mother, story of tortoise, creation myth, story of flood etc. Among them story of Pak Pen Kaka and the Lit Lai tu seems to be very old stories of creation myths. Pak Pen Kaka deals with the creation story from the void, in which the universe and earth has been created along with mankind and nature. In Lit Lai tu, the creation myth deals with the creation after great deluge. In the former one universe, earth and everything had been created from the spider eggs and the earth had been created from spider excrement and a world view of

Tais is reflected. Again in later one, almighty God created the great deluge and after deluge at the destruction of all, a great gourd was sprouted. From the gourd, humankind and nature along with Tais came out and also life had been saved in at the womb of cow during severe hot wave. These two mythologies of Ahom (and other Tais of India too) have similarities to that of Chinese Han cosmogony of Pan Kuo and Dong Lan cosmogony of China, with only some variations and names. The spirit of all these creation myths seems to be same.

The Ahom religion was a pagan one and borrowed some of its terms from old Burmese. The other members of the Tai family, such as the Siamese, the Shans, and the Khamtis of Assam, have been Buddhists for centuries The name of God used therein is Pha-tuw-chung. After their migration to Assam the Ahoms abandoned the employment of that name, and used instead Phu-ra-ta-ra, which is also used by their Buddhist counterparts**.**

Many folk tales are pre-Buddhistic in origin and carry flavor of old Tai culture. Creation myths stories of Ahom seems to be similar to that other Tai groups and even have got relationship to that Chinese Han creation myths Pan Ku story. Many folk tales such as treatment of wicked mother; marriage between snake and a girl, golden carp, story of gourd and creation of life are found among Tai Ahoms as well as other Tai groups of Shan, Thailand, Laos, Yunnan. Tai folk tales of Tais of Assam show an old cultural link to that of other Tais of Southeast Asia and China. The Tai Ahoms share some common cultural traits with other Tai people outside India. They possess a very rich treasure of literary wealth written in archaic Tai script. Even by invoking the similarity in the myths of the tai-Ahoms with those of southeast Asia an interesting linkage between Thailand and Ahom is depicted where Thailand becomes a reference of imitation for the Ahoms. Thailand is the place of nostalgia in Ahom history and it is also necessary to look at the Tai-Ahom identity revival from the perspective of the Thailand, who according to the advocates of Tai-Ahom have been very supportive of their struggle.

In 1939, with the rechristening of Siam as Thailand, attempts were made to bring the diverse communities into one composite society under the name ‘Thai’. It marks the beginning of the process of making the people of Siam into one seamless group of Thai

citizen with Thai language and Buddhist religion as the hallmarks of the Thai people and the construction of Thai nationalism and the Pan-Thai movement still continues in Thailand. The late 1930s saw the inclusion of many groups living outside Thailand but sharing a common Tai ancestry into the Thai fold and a great Thai race was born[59].

This was reinforced by invoking the story of Tai migration from Nanchao in southern China, a theory that was propounded by Western and missionary scholars in the late nineteenth century and had gained wide currency in the early twentieth century. The theory of a common homeland of Tai people enabled the Pan-Thai group to claim the dispersed Tai people and embark on the search for kin throughout Asia. The burgeoning interest in finding ancestors and cousins outside Thailand has led Thai scholars to claim as Tai groups those in Laos, Vietnam, and southern China, in addition to as far west as Assam. Much of it is driven by nostalgic remembrances and the creation of a memory that superseded historical differences among the communities claimed as Tai.

The Pan-Thai movement has not limited its search for ancestors to present-day Southeast Asia but has spread its operation in South Asia too. Chatthip Narthsupha, a professor of economics at Chulalongkorn University and the founder of the Community Culture School, can be mentioned as an active member in spreading Pan Thai ideals among the Tai-Ahom in Assam. He is also an advocate of understanding and studying the Thai self and the cultural relationship among various Tai people and connects the national Thai to the Pan-Thai desires of searching and creating Thai-ness. It is one way of rejecting national borders of the region and acknowledging a free flow of people and culture. The Pan-Thai movement is also an enterprise to create a transnational, global impact of Thai culture and goods and establish Thai hegemony over the neighboring peoples. Although for Chatthip the creation of a pan-Thai identity is a way to create cultural borders in place of political borders, Saikia (2006, p.50) finds that 'the status of Tai groups outside Thailand is compromised to the agenda of identity created and executed by Bangkok Thai intellectuals.' It can be an attempt to create a new Thai hegemony that would make the peripheral Tai groups vulnerable to colonialism by Bangkok.

[59] Refer to Saikia (2006, p.49)

The interaction between the Ahoms and Thai scholars during the First International Thai Studies Conference in 1981 aggravated the differences between Assamese and Ahom, Ahom and Indian, and linked Assam's history to that of Thailand, referring to the migration of the Ahom race from the southeast Asia. This encounter led the Thai history and Pan Thai-ism to transcend the boundaries of Southeast Asia to include areas and peoples from India (South Asia) in the Thai cause. The Ahom became the bridge community to the Thai/Tai community who could now belong to both South and Southeast Asia. From 1981 to 1997, exchanges between Ahom and Thai activists generated a transnational discourse and Assam was seen as a future ground for historical, cultural, and commercial exchanges between South and Southeast Asia. The assertion of a distinct Tai-Ahom identity in Assam and the search for Ahom in Bangkok went on simultaneously. Both these searches had different goals and were interdependent on one another to facilitate it. While the Bangkok intellectuals actively sought out an 'authentic Tai village culture' to empower the local people of Thailand in the face of capitalist intrusion from the West and the Thai state, Tai-Ahom leaders in Assam saw in the Thai endeavor an outlet for their political and economic ambitions.

Migration of the Ahoms from southeast Asia became a memory or history of the community and Thailand a part of the narration that created imagination of a 'homeland' to which the Ahoms belonged and convinced the Tai-Ahom that they were more Thai than they had known. The history was accepted and even Hindus in Upper Assam agreed without hesitation that the Tai-Ahom and the Thai were related in the past, thus distancing the community from the Hindu community. Conferences and seminars on Tai studies were also held in Thailand to facilitate exchange between Tai-Ahom and Thai scholars. Generally speaking, the Tai-Ahom agenda within Thailand was and continues to be marginal compared to Thai interactions with groups in Laos, southern China, and Vietnam. Emphasing on the process and the construction of memories, it is commendable that the Thai successfully established a Thai presence in India through the Tai-Ahom. Thai intellectuals were making inroads into the minds and hearts of the people mapped within India and transforming groups such as the Tai-Ahom into a Thai-like community. One could say that Upper Assam was now part of 'Greater Thailand'.

Commodification of Identity

Saikia (2006) makes an interesting analysis on the Tai-Ahom and Thai relationship and whether the relationship has been commodified, constructed for consumption. Soon after 1981, the label Tai-Ahom became an item of transaction between the two interested parties resulting in a commodification of 'Tai-Ahom objects'. Rituals and ancient Tai-Ahom spirit worship are held for the benefit of Thai delegates visiting Tai-Ahom villages. Thai scholars buy a large number of buranjis, locally called puthis (religious books), available in Sibsagar district and take them back back to Thailand for translation. Such purchases even include corporate fundings[60]. The economic and cultural transactions were not limited to the Thai scholars alone. ULFA has the support of Rebel groups from Upper Burma and adjoining regions in Nepal in reclaiming the past of the swargadeo's kingdom to create a future independent Assam thus raising the stakes of Tai-Ahom history. While Thai scholars indirectly generated income for the Tai-Ahom in Assam through travel and tourism and the buying of 'Tai antiquities', they also disseminated a wide array of 'cultural goods' from Thailand to enable Tai-Ahoms to create a Tai ambiance and lifestyle to distinguish themselves from the Assamese. These include pictures of the Thai monarch and his wife, Buddha images sent regularly from Thailand, tankhas (scroll paintings depicting the Buddha), handwritten manuscripts, and religious robes.

While Thai scholars sought a pre-Buddhist past in Tai-Ahom villages, people in Upper Assam were trying to become like the Thai by making Phra Lung rituals resemble Buddhist rituals. The items sent from Thailand is a means of economic transaction between the two as well as helps the Tai-Ahom to demonstrate that they were not Hindus, but a different religious group practicing ancestor worship along with Buddhism. The Tai-Ahom leaders viewed the association with Thai scholars and supporters as an avenue for cultural, political, and economic transformations and made regular visits to Thailand.

The production and consumption of 'Tai-Ahom' in Assam financially benefited several groups and individuals. It created new jobs for Tai-language teachers, brought business to Tai-Ahom building engineers and contractors who built Tai-Ahom temples

[60] Refer to Saikia (2006, p. 54)

and Sukapha bhavans (Sukapha meeting places), boosted the publication industry of Tai-Ahom books, and created new sites of political power. All these activities also heightened an awareness of a separatist identity and fueled the Tai-Ahom movement. In 2002, a direct flight between Guwahati and Bangkok was operated for a brief period[61]. Many saw it as the beginning of a new relationship with the neighouring country. The Indian government went so far as to acknowledge the historic connections of the Ahom people with Thailand in the hope that a new level of commerce and trade between the two countries would thereby be engendered. But to the disappointment of the supporters of Tai-Ahom identity struggle the flight between Guwahati and Bangkok was discontinued for an 'indeterminate' period ending the formal linking of Assam with Thailand by official authorities. The Tai-Ahom identity movement today serves a limited political agenda in Upper Assam. Ban Ok struggles to keep alive the practice of Phra Lung in its annual conference and public worship celebrations. These events are not glamorous and lavish, as they were a few years ago, and people are losing interest because Tai-Ahom was not accepted as an ST community.

Political Boundary and Identity

The leaders and supporters use the memory of an Ahom past in a creative way to depart from the tyranny of a modern singular national history, within which the Tai-Ahom have been a silent category. The search for an Ahom homeland is debatable as the imagination of a homeland has been instable. It also points out to the possibility that the historical narrative of Ahom cannot be grounded in a solid location and hence must always remain outside the limits of bounded space. This may be an ideal location to situate a critique of the nation-state and of identities bounded in place and time. Some claim a fixed place in Upper Assam, others in Thailand, and for some it is somewhere in southern China.

The tension of homelessness and derogatory representations of frontier people such as the Ahom have made them vulnerable to claims leading to a commodification of their past by more powerful groups, such as the Thai, that create an equivalence to use

[61] Refer to Saikia (2006, p.55);
The times of India (March 6, 2002)
Guwahati-Bangkok flight from April 4, available on: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2002-03-06/kolkata/27138783_1_guwahati-bangkok-flight-weekly-flight-bhargava .

their memories to outline different realities in the present. The Tai-Ahom identity struggle has raised a significant question about the epistemological and geographical limits of Indian history while challenging the inherited colonial and nationalist historiography.

Though some people in Assam relate to the migration history and want to be recognised as Tai-Ahom, there are clear divides between the classes and their respective expectations. The urban class views it as a political and professional tool for empowerment, and they focus on the issue of job allocations and economic improvement. For the groups of deodhais, the Ahom priest, the separate identity struggle has provided a space to resist the exploitative institutions of the caste Hindus and an opportunity to escape from the poor status and powerless condition and once again reach positions of social and religious leadership. The urban youths look at the interactions between the two lands in the form of travel, education and employment in Thailand and a new level of consumerism as a mark of their difference from the Assamese. Irrespective of the gaps between the different groups, it is clear that varieties of people are engaged in the movement and are facilitating and sustaining change.

CONCLUSION

Identity is elastic, temporary, can be made and remade in routine social practices and can even be disagreeable to many. Rise of consciousness in dalit identity, religious identities, linguistic groups and ethnic conflicts have contributed to the significance of identity politics in India. The construction of Indian identity was a result of asserting a national identity against the colonial powers. The new Indian nation that conforms to the present political map of the country came up in 1947 with the partition followed by the independence of the British colony called India into two nations. The entire construction of the idea of 'India' points towards the political project of the nationalist leaders to initiate a process of homogenisation and national will carried out through persuasion, education, organisation. Homogenisation is a crucial part of nation-building where the nation is created by imposing a common culture, language upon its members. Looking at India, this hegemonic ideas are quite prevalent, be in terms of language or religion. The nation has become a powerful state system with multiple communities asserting their nationalities. Protest against imperialist powers was seen as nationalist movements that forms the beginning of the formation of a nation. However, 'nation', 'state' and 'nationalism' become ambiguous terms which may have different meaning for different groups and individuals, in different space and time. These are intrinsically linked with identity.

The political integration of India as a nation-state was an idea borrowed from the western or the modern paradigm of nation state theory. It is also one of the causes that state formation in India has a history of constant tension between the imperial state and regional kingdoms. The nationality question is very complex in north-east India in general and Assam in particular. Linked with ethnicity, micro-nationalist politics has remained a characteristic of Assam which can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century when it asserted its autonomous existence against the British colonial view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal. Though the demand of Assamese as the official language of Assam was made initially to fight the immigration issue and keep the Assamese culture alive, in course of time it came to be seen as a superimposition of a culture of a few on the entire population of the state. The fear of assimilation by

communities such as Bodos, Dimasas, Karbis, Kachari further fuelled identity politics within the territory of Assam. While most of the identity struggles have used violence as a means, the struggle carried out by the Tai-Ahom community is a rather peaceful one.

The identity struggle of the Tai-Ahom community can also be analysed under the light of their fear of assimilation into the 'Assamese' label and is an attempt to break free from this label used as synonymous with Hinduism, a protest against marginalisation of and homogenisation by a certain community. Though it has national aspirations that include the imagination of a homeland, the struggle now seems to be more focused on gaining recognition of a separate identity. The past is seen as a seamless narration of ethnicity or ethnic identity in the making where 'Ahom' becomes an entry point to becoming a defined group. Though much of the reading on the Ahom identity is fuelled by this view, it will be inappropriate to categorise it as an ethnic movement as there is ambiguity regarding the term 'Tai-Ahom'. However convenient it sounds to link identity based demands to ethnicity; one should not ignore the limitations of the colonial administrators who had tried reading the history of the land. Rather than borrowing the colonial definition of Ahom as a historical group of the past; a fresh perspective is required.

Lack of connectivity with the nationalist narrative leads the way to identity movement for a group to create a collective that can rise and resist the intrusion of others into their home grounds. This is the case with the Tai-Ahoms who are successfully questioning the way Indian history has developed so far and the silencing of certain histories and events in order to create a nation. The Tai-Ahoms have questioned the drive to hegemonise Hindu culture in Assam, as it is elsewhere in India. Such construction of cultural homogeneity goes against the multi-religious and multicultural nature of societies. The leaders and supporters of the Tai-Ahom identity struggle use the memory of an Ahom past in order to depart from the tyranny of a modern singular national history, within which Ahoms are a silent category. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that within the realm of the Assamese history writing, the Ahoms have always had a very prominent place. The search for an Ahom homeland or a bounded space is debatable due to its inability to remain grounded in a solid location. While some of the supporters

claim a fixed place in Upper Assam; others in Thailand; some links the nostalgia of origin to southern China. This can provide with an ideal location to provide a critique of the nation-state and of identities bounded in place and time. This identity struggle has come up as a question to the epistemological and geographical limits of Indian history. It is challenging the way the colonisers wrote Indian history and the manipulation of it by the Indian nationalist leaders to construct a grand narrative of the Indian nation.

The Tai-Ahom struggle has not been able to bring the entire community under itself due to class based divisions acting on their respective expectations. 'Tai-Ahomness' has come to mean different things to people within and outside the movement. An ambiguity associated with the people demanding a separate identity of Tai-Ahomness is that some of them still continue with their Hindu practices. In the post-independent Indian state, the Ahoms have been declared as a backward group even though they have demanded a scheduled tribe status. Such demands in turn ask for a new definition of 'scheduled tribe' as they had a fairly resourceful status before the advent of British rule. For the urban class it has become a political tool for empowering themselves through the issue of job allocations and economic improvement. For some, an alternative Ahom identity is a failed political rhetoric that aims at gaining benefits. While for the Ahom religious priests, the assertion is a means to resist the exploitative institutions of the caste Hindus. The transnational character of the struggle linking it with other regions of southeast Asia is seen by few of the members as an avenue for travel, education and employment in Thailand. Thus, it is difficult to allocate a single characteristic to the struggle. Rather it has to be seen taking into account all these aspirations. Though it shows the character of an identity struggle, it is necessary to understand how the identity is constructed and for what purpose. The community has used memory and myth to create a politics of identity that looks into the history of silences. It is a strong critique of the nationalist history of the country that has been created by claiming, coercing, co-opting, and often erasing the histories of the many people living within its territories. The emphasis on the past brings to focus that history is a crucial aspect of every community. It is a quest of knowing the past to connect it with the present. However, the narrative of a community need not be read as an actual journey. A different perspective can look at

the migration history of the Tai-Ahoms in Assam as a possibility of a metaphor of the shared cultures of Assam and Burma.

The Transformation of the Tai-Ahom movement into a transnational issue through intellectual engagement is an important development for those engaged in the movement as well as the Indian state. It can be interesting to study whether Thailand's involvement is to be seen as a threat to the idea of Indian nationalism or is it an opening up of global avenues to study 'this part' of the country. It is also a reflection on the problematic of the construction of identity on the basis of political boundaries. Identity is a contested issue everywhere. The Tai-Ahom identity is a fluid, spontaneous one and yet to be fully constructed. This study also discussed the idea of the nation-state. When pre-independent India was seen as, or rather got constructed as an entity which needs to be freed from the enemy, i.e. foreign rule; the nation was born. But with its independence, the nationalist leaders had to look towards alternative ties that could keep the people united into a nation. As a result history, or more specifically, common glory and despair became that binding where, unfortunately, northeast became a silent and distant zone in this formation. It created a space of ambiguity as the people from certain parts felt rejected with the exclusion of their history from the nationalist narrative and began looking at the Indian state as another coloniser. On the other hand, the state saw it as a failure to the nation state formation and hence responded with force.

Assam and the Tai Ahom are unspoken subjects of Indian history that challenge the statist parameters of Indian history and politics. To voice a separate identity as a new possibility in the world of identity politics is to defy the bounded national space and the construction of a homogeneous Hindu identity in India. As a result of colonial administration, regions within the country got divided into core and periphery. This separation continued and is still continuing in the postcolonial state. The border, despite being in a state of transition, defines the group boundary with notions of exclusion and inclusion and cultural differentiation. The frontier areas are treated differently and the loyalty of those residing there are under frequent surveillance. Tai-Ahom has questioned the theory of 'centre formation' and has attempted to create an interstitial history in the face of this ubiquitous silence. Even the Bodo identity movement is a reaction to this

'centre formation' and mainstreaming of Assamese identity and in the process raising the question of who is the indigenous one. To oppose the silencing of history, often narratives are used to assert the difference, or as an assertion against the appropriation.

Nation formation is about forgetting and accepting. In case of the Ahoms, their previous conquests of the small kingdoms have been forgotten and are accepted by the masses and hence are seen as part of the Assamese community despite their history of migration. However, their quest for recognition can be dealt with when one realises that after the British conquest, their condition and status deteriorated which was unacceptable to many and hence a separate identity can be seen as an effective means to break away from the encompassing Assamese identity.

Identity is constructed by the people through interaction in a given socio-economical context, taking into consideration what is preserved in history and tradition in a given culture. Though the centrality of identity construction in the formation of a nation is widely accepted, the process of constructing that identity remains uncertain and contested most of the times. Most of the time leaders propagating nationalist feeling and fighting for the cause of nation-building take recourse in shared history, arguments of similar race of its people, and a concurrent feeling of solidarity in order to justify their authority, define and often extend the nation's borders, and nurture a sense of identity in the territory over which they claim sovereignty. Nationalism is a political claim on people's loyalty and solidarity and is used as the tool to transmit national identity across time and space and while doing so they most often make the mistake of looking at the 'history' of the so called nation in a linear plane.

It cannot be ignored that nation formation is intrinsically linked with the quest for identity formation. Claims for creating a nation is made to the people who is supposed to redefine their identity by seeking to change the way they understand and identify themselves. Challenge to the existing territorial and political order becomes a norm when the community imagined by the nationalists as a 'nation' fails to coincide with the territory or citizenry of the state and their claims to nationhood. Such challenges gain expression through demands for change in the political map, involving the demand for an independent state, or an autonomous polity. Claim to nationhood also involves the state as it is considered to be in a position to validate the claim and offer official recognition.

Nation, as a category is at times invoked for nation-building, to create a sense of national unity for a given polity rather than to challenge the existing territorial and political order. It can also be used to assert 'ownership' of the polity on behalf of a 'core' ethnocultural 'nation' that views itself as distinct from the citizenry of the state as a whole, and thereby to define or redefine the state on the basis of that core 'nation'. Nationalism is not only a political principle but deeply entwined with questions of personal and collective identity. Membership to a particular nation provides a sense of belonging and recognition which creates the categories of insider/outsider, self/other, us/them. The nation state building enterprise has always emphasised on integration and homogenisation that fails to take note of dynamics of composite culture. Nation building in India too suffers from the same drawback and politics of identity revolves around these structures. Over the years, it has led to the resurgence of historical legacies often in the form of memories that threaten to alter the meanings and results of political actions. In the northeastern part of the country, ethnicity has emerged as historical units claiming for self-determination, autonomy as well as space in the mainstream politics.

This study analysed the context in which the Tai-Ahom identity struggle developed and looked at it as a 'text' in order to understand identity struggle. In the course of the discussion it tried to point out the role of history and memory in the formation of a nation. Individuals or groups of individuals can come together to share memories of particular events of the past and internalise them through multiple acts of remembrance and social interaction to create a collective memory or remembrance. People come together to frame a national identity on the basis of past glories but one important question that need further probing is whose glory is it. When those framing the identity try to do so by emphasising on some past victories, it leads to the neglect of the 'memory' of those for whom the same incident can represent the sorrows or humiliation of defeat. Such collective memories can successfully challenge the myth of the nation, state boundaries as well as the essence of nationalism.

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