

**VOICES OF NATIONALISM: A DISCOURSE OF PEASANT  
MOBILIZATION FROM BORDER VILLAGES IN ASSAM**

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**DECLARATION**

This dissertation entitled 'Voices of Nationalism: A Discourse of Peasant Mobilization from Border Villages in Assam', submitted by Indrani Talukdar, to the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, for the award of the degree of the Master of Philosophy is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University.

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**CERTIFICATE**

We recommend that the dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

National identity and the sense of belonging to a nation are the most general characteristics for any group of people that inhabit the same territory, speak the same language, and share the same culture and historical narrative (cited in Krasznay, 2010, pp. 12). The modern state is generally called the nation-state. It first came into cognizance in the nineteenth century to denote the first modern states: Greece in 1830, Belgium in 1831, Italy in 1861, Germany in 1871 and Serbia in 1878 (Krasznay, 2010, pp.12). Of late, nationalism has begun to occupy a very controversial position in the popular discourse in Political Science and Sociology among other social sciences. In addition to that, debates and discussions in the public sphere on the theme reverberate every now and then. The interest in this theme of research is the outcome of such debates.

Broadly, the study would facilitate a nuanced understanding of recurrent themes like nationalism, identity and border dynamics which come under the purview of political sociology and sociology of social movements. Sociological literature on nationalism since the last few decades have turned around from the so called elite phenomenon and brought out the nuances of the ideology from the subaltern angle. This study would in a way contribute to the relationship between nationalism and peasant protests. The area of study is located in the border between Assam and Nagaland which is why it would also enable a different sociological analysis of how border lives alienate the already marginalized communities living in the temporary forest villages.

The forest villages were established in the North Eastern region with added emphasis with a view to ensure steady supply of labour both during and after the colonial period. Border conflicts between Assam and Nagaland frequently turn a rough leaf and fall heavy on the inhabitants of the forest villages situated along the border. The villagers, who are engaged in cultivation of agriculture among other activities like supplying labour for the maintenance of the forest, are hence victims of violence. On the one hand they face the threat of periodic eviction from the state and on the other, they are prone to attacks from the neighbouring Naga tribes. Often, they mobilize themselves to assert their Asamiya identity which do not find mention in the nationalist discourse of the north east, especially that of Assam. As is a characteristic feature of mainstream Assamese nationalism, migrants from erstwhile East Bengal settled in the village find themselves

in a somewhat hostile situation from the rest of the peasants who are composed of both tribal groups and others. As such, it is important to look at how the border question features in the existing literature on nationalism. How do the inhabitants of border villages find resonance in the literature? Are they protectors of their border, or do they seem oblivious to the whole processes whereby nationalist agenda is propagated? Further, the question of identity itself tangles with the aspects of peasant livelihood, process of migration and state recognition. Such questions would be reflected in the study, which further seeks to bring out the unique context of identity of the inhabitants of the forest villages in Assam vis-à-vis their peasant conditions and situation of conflict.

## **1.1 Understanding Nationalism and its Facets**

Classical sociological theorists Marx and Weber paid very scant attention to nationalism. Marx paid primary importance to the forces of production, and just like religion and law nationalism occupies a secondary place in his thesis. In Marxian view, with the development of capitalism, the bourgeois class espouses a call for nationalist order to consolidate and retain its position. As Petrus recounts, in the bourgeois epoch of historical development, the state has as its purpose the institutionalization of bourgeois power, while nationality functions as the ideological core around which the bourgeoisie both consolidates its domestic power over the working class and peasants, and solidifies and regiments a nation vis-à-vis other capitalistic nations. With the development of the division of labour, private property, and commodity production, man finds himself alienated from nature, from himself, from his fellow beings, and from the products of his labour. The teleological development of history leads towards the re-establishment of the species on a higher plane of existence, and the over-coming of alienation and divisions (Petrus, 1971). Communism will abolish all national and class distinctions. In *The German Ideology*, written in 1845-46, just after the Paris Manuscripts, one finds more explicit references to the ultimate universalism to be attained under global communism. Before the final resolution of the antagonism between men, civil society expresses itself in separatism and organizes itself vis-a-vis other peoples as discrete 'nationalities'. It organizes itself internally in the form of the state (ibid, pp. 797-824).



One hardly finds a definite scholastic attention on nation or nationalism by Max Weber in *Economy and Society*. This is not to suggest that Weber did not dwell on the subject at all; Perry Anderson (cited in Norkus, 2004, pp. 391) observes that he was so bewitched by the spell of nationalism that he was unable to theorize it. The concept of the "ethnic" group, which dissolves if one defines the terms exactly, corresponds in this regard to one of the most vexing, since emotionally charged concepts: the nation, as soon as one attempts a sociological definition (cited in Norkus, 2004 pp. 394). He roughly translates nation into a community based on feeling (*gemeinschaft*), for which "its own state would be an adequate expression; therefore, it normally tends to bring about such a state" (*ibid.*). Weber however like Marx believed that a rational analysis or scientific sociology would hardly have the terms 'nation' and 'ethnicity' in its dictionary. Zenonas Norkus observes that by 'national feelings', Weber meant how one feels about power prestige or cultural prestige of his "own" nation state.

Thus both Marx and Weber were wary of nationalism in the west, eventually proclaiming its decline with time. The literature on the themes of nation and nationalism primarily revolve around two main schools: the primordial school and the modernist school. Primordialism is the perspective that nationalism derives from the early 'primordial' or fundamental roots and sentiments such as being born into a particular religious community, speaking a certain language or having certain traditions and rituals. Paul Brass (1991) argues that ethnic attachments are felt as natural for the individual, spiritual in character and provide a foundation for an early 'affinity' with others of same or similar backgrounds. Modernists see nations and nationalism as entirely modern phenomena, beginning predominantly in Europe with the advent of industrialization. According to this school, nationalism and its cultural symbols used in the construction of the nation are invented as a form of top-down control. Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner are two distinguished scholars of this school.

In addition to these broader schools, others like the Ethno symbolist school represented by Anthony D. Smith and others emphasize the importance of symbols, traditions, myths, and values in the creation and continuation of nations. Deemed as somewhat a middle ground, the scholars of this school believe that nations are themselves modern phenomena, but pre-modern roots espoused by primordialism are also vital to understanding peoples' relationships to the nation.

Benedict Anderson defined the nation as “an imagined political community- and imagined both as inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1983, pp. 6). Language plays a key role in the proliferation of national identity and nationalism. He, therefore, is of the opinion that both ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ are social constructs derived out of cultural artefacts in the eighteenth century; through the construction of the “other” one’s identity is built. With the dwindling role of religion and old monarchs, space was created for the construction of an imagination of communities, solved by nation and nationalism.

For Hobsbawm, the most important truth about nations is that most of them are products of "social engineering" by elites which are coming into power or consolidating their power position. Doing engineering work, they invent and fabricate traditions, and falsify histories to foster the feeling of belonging to a nation as a community. For him, ‘inventing tradition’ refers to the adoption of a set of practices and rules that are of ritual or symbolic nature which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which implies continuity with the past (2000, pp. 1). Traditions hence possess a modern character since it is the invention of the recent time (ibid.). Moreover, changes in the structure of the state also leads to the emergence of many symbols and circulated through school, language and other modern communication routes (which also constitutes Althusser’s concept of ideological state apparatus whereby the hegemony of the ruling classes is maintained by the promulgation of ideas through the educational system, law and other means of communication. The State is the manifestation of this domination, acting as a guardian of their interests).

For Gellner, nationalism is the imposition of high culture on society replacing local, low cultures and multiculturalism. With industrialization, the barriers between communities are broken due to standardized, mass communication which allows for economic and social mobility. By nationalism, he meant "a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" (Gellner, 1983, pp. 1). This implies that the state derives its legitimacy from the idea on political representation. Decisions hence made by the state becomes binding on the citizens because they were made by the representatives elected by them. It is assumed that the citizens as individuals in the society have a sense of sharing, or of community, articulated in

terms of community or national belonging. Gellner distinguishes 3 types of nationalism: "Habsburg" or "Ruritanian," classical liberal, and diaspora nationalism. Gellner concentrates on the first type, because in his opinion this type surpasses the others by its potential for outbreaks of collective violence. It is generated by situations where the political unit is politically controlled by the members of a cultural group with privileged access to high culture, whereas other cultural groups are excluded both from power and high culture. A successful nationalist movement, engendered by this type of social situation, has to create both a separate high culture disseminated by the educational system and a separate political state.

Anthony D Smith proposes in his book *National Identity* (1991, pp. 73) that nationalism as a language and symbolism begins as an elite phenomenon in which intellectuals play a preponderant role. All of these thinkers recognize the potential of an elite or dominant section of the society to mobilize themselves and the others on nationalist lines. He defines nationalism as an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential nation (2005, pp. 9). He defines civic nationalism in terms of territory; a nation owns a well-defined territory with historical significance and sacralization (Guibernau, 2004). It has a political community which lay claims to equality, civic and economic rights of the society. Ethnic nationalism, on the other hand, revolve around the importance of the natal community of which one is a member. *National Identity* involves some sense of political community; a political community implies common institutions and a single code of rights and duties for all the members of the community. This western or civic model of nation suggests a definite social space, a fairly demarcated and bounded territory. The non-western model, on the other hand, is an ethnic conception of the nation (Smith, 1991, pp. 12). This pays emphasis on a community of common descent. Smith notes that Eastern Europe and Asia provides a dynamic political challenge to these two models; in fact, every nationalism consists of the elements from both the models.

In the case of Gellner's thesis, the contention is that the dominant group is overthrown by a subordinate and this leads to the legitimacy of the subordinate's (read: no more subordinate) nationalist ideology. This type of contention runs into problem when one encounters the question of ethno or sub-nationalism where the subordinate's agenda may or may not materialize into the holding of power but at the same time their nationalist claims are not ignored as mere 'rants'.

Guha (1982) maintains that the concept of nationalism in India is a modern construct, to be coined when the necessity was felt after the coming of the British. According to Aloysius (1997, pp. 109), nationalism is a movement for transfer of power from the alien ruler to preserve the pre-national form of differential power realization within society, in the subcontinent.

## **1.2 Nationalisms and the Peasantry (in Assam)**

Since the last few decades subaltern historiography have highlighted an alternate discourse whereby the voices of marginalized sections asserting their own claims and stands are brought out. First pioneered by Gramsci in the west, it was soon adopted in India by scholars like Ranajit Guha who turned academic attention to peasant insurgency in India. Ramchandra Guha, a proponent of this school, in his book *The Unquiet Woods* (2000) mentions two distinct approaches in the literature on peasant and working class movements: structural-organizational (SO) paradigm which deals with large scale historical processes like capitalism and their impact on different social classes; and political-cultural (PC) paradigm that interrogates the systems of political legitimacy and the interplay between ideologies of domination and subordination. Until recently, he contends, historical research on Indian nationalism was located firmly in the SO genre and hence neglected the 'internal face' of Indian nationalism. Amita Baviskar's exemplary work *In The Belly of the River* (1995) captures how culture plays a very important role in the political mobilization of the community against development. Through the book, she questions the portrayal of tribal/indigenous communities' egalitarian nature in existing literature on development, their 'harmonious' relationship with nature and the representation of their life as an alternative to development. Both Guha and Baviskar's works demonstrate the ecological angle to protests, the conflict between man and nature vis-à-vis wider developmental paradigms.

The relationship between the peasantry and nationalism is evident if one delves into the anti-colonial movement in India. Many scholars like Kathleen Gough (1974), D. N. Dhanagare (1973), Eric Stokes (1976), David Hardiman (1985), Ranajit Guha (1983) among others have looked at the forms of solidarity among the peasantry, and examined the role played by different parts of the peasantry in the nationalist movement (Hardiman, 1985, 1992). A wide number of scholars have also looked at the nationalist movements in the North-east and in Assam, in relation to the agrarian mobilizations.

Pradip Phanjoubam in his book *The Northeast Question: Conflicts and Frontiers* (2015) recounts two large divergent strands within which analysis of the history of modern Assamese nationalism falls into. One disagrees that the birth of modern Assamese political consciousness is a recent phenomenon and traces its roots in the antiquity of the great Aryan culture. This school sees Assamese cultural evolution as closely aligned with the great Indic culture of Aryan India, and consequently, the birth of modern Assamese nationalism as very much a part of Indian nationalism. Udayon Misra, a proponent of this school, in his essay *The Periphery Strikes Back* argues that Assam should not be clubbed in the same regional category as the rest of the Northeastern states on the plea of its much more pronounced cultural and political proximity to mainstream India from historical times.

The second school sees the genesis of modern Assamese nationalism as a reaction to Bengali cultural hegemony, thus earning the designation as ‘little nationalism’. Calling attention to the two levels of nationalism in India, i.e. pan-Indian nationalist movement and regional nationalism, Guha argues that what is true of the bigger nationalities is also largely true of the small nationalities. A politically mobilized minority is the ‘alter-ego’ of a ‘nation state’ desperate to make a sense of its self (Fazal, 2013, pp. 11). It occupies contiguous territories, often live in a mixed society and largely share a common memory of what happened in Indian history. They also share traditional and modern values and are exposed to powerful and centralized modern communication media. In a very similar light, T. K. Oommen also states the “great Indian nationalism” flaunted the ideology of the pan- Indian big bourgeoisie, and the little nationalism of the regional small bourgeoisie. However, Guha starkly believes in the fact that the Axamiya (or Asamiya) national movement does not owe its origins to students nor is it spontaneous; its organizational and ideological roots are in the Axamiya upper classes that control the state’s powerful local press. The movement, he further contends, was national in its form and chauvinist and undemocratic in its content and proto-fascist in its methods. In his seminal work *Little Nationalism turned Chauvinist* (1980) demonstrates the two faces of the Axamiya national movement: non-violent in its dealings with the center (Delhi), and coercive and violent towards the dissident minorities. The struggle against the big bourgeoisie landlords for radical transformation is a perennial form of protest, one that the populations at large are engaged in. In this light, peasant struggle against the colonial legacy of state policies can be said to occupy another level of dissent, one that can be identified as peasant nationalism drawn from a

geographic and political site of contestation. Michael Hechter's book *Internal Colonialism* (1977) emphasizes on the fact that in the process of industrialization, there is a new 'cultural division of labour' imposed by the ruling group that indelibly associates deprivation not with members of an oppressed social class but of an oppressed or exploited ethnic group or race. The deprived group made painfully aware of their denigration resort to building their path to social and political emancipation by emphasizing on their very distinctiveness.

Arupjyoti Saikia in his book *A Century of Protests* (2014) recounts how the peasantry in Assam mobilized numerous times against the colonial government on issues like rent and patta, a promise many Assamese leaders gave. Political scientist Sanjib Baruah argues that the germ of political turmoil in the state, to a great extent, is also a function and reaction to land tenure policies introduced by the British, which left the Assamese peasantry in the plains as well as the tribal communities in the hills under severe land alienation pressure. His books *India Against Itself* and *Durable Disorder* demonstrates the processes whereby sub-nationalism in Assam is asserted against the hegemony of the upper-class Assamese nationalism.

Seeped into this form of alienation, the rural peasantry occupying forest lands face catastrophic consequences whereby they are slowly over a period of time estranged from the lands they have resided in. As Ramchandra Guha pointed out, Indian nationalist historiography also failed to analyze the impact of colonial environment and forest policies on the agrarian economy and peasant protest (2000, pp. 2-5). The colonial policy of settling down communities in forest lands for labour and not providing any land rights to them hardly finds resonance in the existing literature on the subject; moreover one seldom dwells on the issue of how border conflicts (intra and inter-states) fall heavy on these hapless peasants who thereby are drawn into the nationalist schema of asserting their Axomiya identity. Arupjyoti Saikia in his essays reflects upon the historical genesis of peasant mobilization in two villages located in upper Assam by locating their concern for the security of tenure on forest land that they have occupied and cultivated in the course of waves of migration. He recounts that not only did the Doyang–Tengani movement adopt an exclusionary policy towards those peasants who – as 'illegal' immigrants from Bangladesh – now lived and worked in the forests of Assam, barring them from membership, but in 2005 its joint leadership appealed to the Chief Minister of Assam not to proceed with the formation of Greater Nagalim.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

Academic discourse on nationalism in India is broadly divided into two camps: one that focuses on political-elite led nationalism, or the nationalism from below, i.e. peasant insurgency and protests. Both tend to see nationalism as a response to the policy of colonial imperialism in India, hence they were anti-colonial nationalisms. Peasant demands in the former had a more latent character than the latter. In the post colonial state, nationalism began to be identified increasingly with the state, thereby any action or ideology promoting differently would be termed anti-state or anti-national. T.K. Oommen demonstrates that the voluminous literature on nation and nationalism reflect both the positive and negative connotations of the term nationalism: in the context of anti-imperialist struggle it constituted a positive force, but if any of the constituent units of the multi-national colony asserted its separateness as a nation it would be anti-national, thus displaying a negative connotation. Peasant protests even after India attained sovereignty displayed the hollow character of the Indian nationalist project. The ideology and political programme, Amalendu Guha notes, of political and economic emancipation remained anti-imperialist, and not anti-feudal in the same fervor. The question remains as to where peasant demands and assertions in contemporary times are placed; termed as “contra-nationalism” they are argued to have similar processes like that of nationalist consolidation. Guha also points out to the two-level national consciousness that operate simultaneously: one is the nationality consciousness at the regional level and the other the parallel Indian national consciousness. Hegemonic Assamese nationalism (regional) led by the students unions and political leaders that grew as a reaction against the imposition of Bengali language in the colonial and against immigrants in the post colonial period have hardly provided a narrative of the peasant nationalism today that has emerged in the border areas, subsumed under wider concerns over land rights. It is important to look at the mannerisms whereby Indian nationalism along with Assamese nationalism impact on the definition of who is an ‘Asamiya’ in the understanding of peasant forest dweller. The negotiations that take place between the three levels of nationalism, i.e. Indian, regional (Assamese) and peasant nationalism in the state are to be explored through the study.

## 1.4 The research questions

1. What is the relationship between Indian nationalism and Assamese nationalism? In particular, the research work would enquire into the various articulations of nationalism and sub-nationalism as championed by Assamese urban/middle class intelligentsia and its impact on peasant consciousness in the state.
2. How do communities residing in temporary villages (*taungya*) respond to the tension between the broader narrative of Indian nationalism and the Assamese sub-nationalist movement?
3. How do existing theories of nationalism explain the complexity of the existing diversity of peasant mobilizations?

With these questions in mind, the different chapters would seek to uncover the interplay between nationalist consciousness and politics associated with peasant life. The study would be divided into three substantive chapters. The first chapter would enquire into the relationship between nationalism at the Indian and regional level with peasant consciousness in general and in Assam in particular. It would draw an analogy between the different levels of nationalism, viz. Indian nationalism and Assamese sub-nationalism, and through an identification of the common variables in the ideological framework of both, the chapter would look on their subsequent influence on peasant nationalism in general, and in Assam.

The second chapter would look at peasant consciousness through a tracing of the historiography of the genesis of the nationalist assertion among the peasants; it would enquire into the factors contributing to the same. The nuances of peasant assertions would be explored through this chapter, their subsequent impact on state policies and on social conditions in the post colonial state.

The third chapter would look at the incidence of peasant nationalism at the villages under study. The politics associated with border seems to ramify themselves onto the relationships between man and man. Through an analysis of the nationalist movement, the chapter would sociologically locate the participants of the assertion and their relationship with the 'others'. It would also engage in the debate over colonial and post colonial imposition of cartographic dimensions and



its implications reflected in the socio-politico lives of the inhabitants of the forest villages and the adjoining areas.

## **1.5 Objectives**

1. To bring out how inter-state border affects the politico-cultural lives of the forest dwellers in Assam.
2. To analyse the factors that lead to the construction of nationalism among peasant populations in general and forest villagers in particular.

## **1.6 Methodology**

At the onset, it would be necessary to ponder upon the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the study. The ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions, which in turn give rise to methodological considerations. This helps in to understand the issues of instrumentation and data collection. Ontological assumptions concern the very nature or essence of the social phenomena being investigated (cited in Cohen et al, 2007). The reality is either an objective or subjective phenomena. The philosophical debates around ontological assumptions revolve around the nominalist and realist strand. The nominalist position holds that objects of thought are merely words and that there is no independently accessible thing constituting the meaning of a word. On the other hand, the realist position states that objects have an independent existence and are not dependent for it on the knower (ibid.). Taking from this perspective, the study would rely on nominalist ontological assumption. The study provides an active space to the meaning of nationalism with special reference to the ethno symbolist perspective, which believes that nations and nationalism are modern constructs. In providing an active space to nationalism, this study does not put it in an advantageous position in respect to other aspects. It tries to focus on nationalism's adjusting nature in the light of contexts within which its meaning from the time of inception carries the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions. Thus nationalism is not solely seen as having an independent existence as a universal and homogeneous phenomenon, but as a construction which is affected by other

factors. Construction in the context of the study would mean a synthesis in meaning making between economy, polity and cultural dimensions manifested in the relation between geographical location (border) and peasant mobilization.

The epistemological assumption takes into consideration the very bases of knowledge. It focuses on the nature and forms, how it can be acquired and how it can be communicated to other human beings (cited in Cohen et al, 2007). The epistemological assumptions determine extreme positions on the issues of whether knowledge is something which can be acquired on the one hand, or is something which has to be personally experienced on the other. Two strands that justify the existence of epistemological position are the positivist strand and the anti positivist strand. The positivist strand tries to view knowledge as hard, objective and tangible and demands of researcher an observer role. On the other hand, the anti positivist strand tries to view knowledge as personal, subjective and unique (ibid.). The study would avail both positivist and the anti positivist strand. Nationalism here is given meaning with respect to varied processes. And in order to reach out to the meaning of the term the knowledge to be relied on must be of both macro and micro nature. This is because is interrelated to economic, social, economic and cultural processes on the one hand and it is intrinsically related to the 'self' versus 'other' on the other hand which belongs to the micro realm.

In terms of the philosophical standpoints, this study would adopt the hermeneutic tradition of understanding. This tradition demonstrates how historical and cultural epochs shape subjective meanings. As hermeneutic understanding entails the reconstruction of lives through the understanding of texts, one must be aware of reliving the experiences of the other by understanding the linguistic and historical exegesis. Reliving here does not imply duplicating but understanding the life of the subject being studied. Through this position, a historical method would be employed for the collection and analysis of primary and secondary data. In order to embark on a systematic analysis, existing literature on the subject such as books, newspapers and pamphlets, archives would be studied. The engagement with literature and concepts drawn from different textual sources would be inter-disciplinary in nature, with insights from history, economics, social anthropology and political science. Data would be analysed through books, pamphlets, journals, newspapers, archives and the internet. Information was also, at the beginning of delving into this theme, collected through informal discussions with some members

and supporters of the NGO, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) who is one of the foremost peasant organization in Assam.

The location of this study is the Doyang and Tengani (Nambhor) areas in Assam. These are reserved forests which were established during the colonial period. The location of these forest villages along the Assam- Nagaland Border lends to the uniqueness of the peasant struggles to be dealt in detail in the following chapters.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Nationalism and Peasant Consciousness: An Overview**

“A second characteristic of our time is the prevalence of nationalism”.-Emily Balch<sup>1</sup>

The origin of the concept of nation and nationalism can be traced back to the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 that culminated in Germany. Nationalism, as defined by the vast majority of scholars on the subject, broadly is a political ideology that relates with a cultural dimension. Sentiments, language, symbols are an integral part of any political ideology and hence one cannot divorce nationalism from cultural phenomena (Smith A. D., 1991). It is primarily a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent (Gellner, 1983, pp. 01). Conversely, the essence of nationalism is to be depicted as the marriage of state and culture (Gellner, 1994, pp. 31). If the nation-state is the congruence of culture and polity, nationalism is nothing else but its ideological vehicle (Fazal, 2015, pp. 03). The legitimate state looks after or protects a culture, and culture requires a state if they are to express themselves properly (ibid.). This statement, of course, presumes that all nationalisms seek to champion statehood; State renouncing nationalisms, T. K. Oommen (2002, pp. 271) argues, go unrecognized in the academic discourse which is why the assumption about nations seeking state is made. However, the role of the state in the assertion of national identity is far from exaggerated. Nationalism, he argues, emerges only in the milieu in which the existence of the state is already taken very much for granted. The existence of politically congruent units, and of a moral-political climate in which such centralized units are taken for granted and are treated as normative, is a necessary but not sufficient condition of nationalism. Louis Wirth (1936) argues nationalism refers to those social movements, attitudes, and ideologies which characterize the behaviour of nationalities engaged in the struggle to achieve, maintain or enhance their position in the world. He thus identifies the social context of the ideological movements entrenched in the quest for political recognition.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1946/balch-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1946/balch-lecture.html)

## **2.1 Idea of Nation-State and its Ramifications on Nationalism**

In order to derive the political connotation of nationalism, i.e. how the nation came to be identified increasingly with the state, one must delve into the discourse on the nationalist movements in the ex-colonial countries. Oommen (1997, pp. 28-33) argues that the nationalist movements of the ex-colonial countries were explicitly political and oriented towards state-building. These movements made efforts to transform colonies into states and subjects into citizens. However, at the height of the imperialist activity, it is often forgotten that colonies were multi-national entities. The primary objective of the anti-imperialist struggle was hence to break free from the chains of foreign domination and establish sovereign self-governments. In this manner, nations and states came to be treated as synonymous entities. In Europe, the emergence of the 'nation' as a distinct political entity was the creation of the French Revolution. For Roland Axtmann (2004, pp. 259-279) the notion of the 'nation'-state came to stand for the idea that legitimate government could only be based upon the principle of self-determination and that, ideally, the nation and the state ought to be identical with one another. The 'nation' became the unitary body in which sovereignty resided. Sovereignty is premised on the occupation and possession of territory. The state became the focal point of political mobilization; every social group (which have all the makings of a nation) find themselves compelled to strive to capture, or influence, the core institutions of the state in order to advance their own objectives.

It is imperative at this point that one draws a fine line of distinction between the connotations of the terms 'nation'- 'state' in political science and political sociology.

As is evident from Axtmann's analysis, the concepts of sovereignty and self-determination encompassing citizenship rights and participatory democracy are of utmost interest to political scientists. Historically, states have existed all throughout in the form of kingdoms but the concept of the nation-state is a modern phenomenon. The politico-administrative units (state) like in the modern sense of the term did not exist in Asia and Africa before colonialism; such divisions and units did, however, exist in the form of lines defined by kinship and kingship (Oommen, 1997, pp. 8). Nationalism, Axtmann notes, tightened the relationship between the 'state' and the 'society'; the universalisation of the nation-state went hand in hand with the "nationalization" of culture. Cultural achievements became routinely claimed for "nations"; culture became "nationalized" and "territorialized" (ibid.). Political sociologists, hence, place

“nation” as a socio-cultural and historical entity as the unit of enquiry. They locate nations as conscious social elements as groups situating themselves in a global order of self-reflection. The idea of nation is flexible and persistent, it lays deep roots in the imagined and real past, as well as its adaptation capacity to over changing realities (Botelho, 2014, pp. 868- 885). Wagner claims that as a consequence of the process of globalization the nation-state is not a universal experience or a “natural” result of societal dynamics, but a very specific and contingent form of relating authority and solidarity (cited in Botelho, 2014). In the course of globalization, Eder proclaims that the national state (read as state) faces a paradox; of becoming a central actor in the process of globalization while its central unity (nation state) is being undermined by both supranational and primordial forms of solidarity or feelings of belonging which no longer coincide with national frontiers (ibid.). What is left is the national state without the nation. The national state is gaining space as a rational collective actor and an interest group all the while discounting itself from the national identity which is now challenged by other claims on identity.

Theories on nationalism can hardly be divorced from the social context of which its elements derive themselves from. Hence ethnicity, class and race are recurrent themes on the sociological literature on nationalism. For instance, Marx referred to the division of the French nation into the nation of workers and the nation of owners (cited in Oommen, 1997, pp. 205). However, he saw in the rise of capitalism a world economic order where concepts such as nation and nationalism would be null and void. Sociology explores the underpinnings of collective mobilization; it interrogates the capacity of the agency and the individual to be creative and also looks at the structural constraints that limit the possibilities of such collective action (Botelho, 2014, pp. 875). A sociological study on nationalism, Aloysius (Aloysius, *Nationalism and Nation in India: A Sociological Reading of Colonial Indian History*, 1993) claims, would look at the changes that had or had not taken place on the Indian subcontinent when the nationalist agenda was propagated, how the political movement placed itself vis-à-vis these changes, and finally, how the ideological movement aided or hindered in the making of a new nation. A nation is incessantly in search of roots; the tendency to differentiate one’s roots from another’s is the driving force behind nation (Oommen, 2004), and its subsequent ideology of claiming an identity based on roots.

## 2.2 The Milieu of Nationalism in India

Nationalism takes its colour from its context, writes Anthony D Smith in his work *National Identity* (1991). The concept of nationalism in India finds its roots in the anti-colonial struggles that began in the nineteenth century. In every country, sociologist Desai argues, the development of nationalism borrows its character from the psychological and economic traits of the social classes which are the vanguard of the struggle for a distinct national identity (1948, pp. 03). He belongs to that school of thought who firmly seeks satisfaction by believing that the germs of nationalism would never find daylight without the advent of capitalism. The new social classes (the progressive sections of the bourgeoisie, and petty bourgeoisie, peasantry and the proletariat) were formed out of the new economic order and the new national society, and as such they felt the pressure of the reactionary feudal elements as well as the imperialist rule on their free development (ibid.). The culture of these new social classes became national in form when they developed group consciousness, and these growing cultures subsequently became the totality of national culture in India. The village agriculture began to be identified as national agriculture, and its problems attained national significance. In India, it was Gandhi who sought the participation of different sections of the society in the Indian national movement. Participation from workers, peasants, students, lawyers and other professional classes and women attributed to the multi-class and mass character of the nationalist movement. The objective was to constitute a state-building project that would subsequently emerge out of the anti-colonial movement; it was thus a state-centred nationalism.

Broadly, state centred nationalisms, Oommen (2002) holds, fall into two categories: state seeking and state sponsored nationalism. State sponsored nationalism unleashes a process of assimilation of religious and linguistic minorities into the national mainstream. If the earlier nationalism was a mobilization against an external colonizer, the new nationalisms are against internal colonizers. This can be invoked in the context of dependency theory that explicates how certain 'elites' control the resources and thereby control the population and the economy of a dependent country. Michael Hechter's book *Internal Colonialism* emphasizes on the fact that in the process of industrialization, there is a new 'cultural division of labour' imposed by the ruling group that indelibly associates deprivation not with members of an oppressed social class but of an oppressed or exploited ethnic group or race. The deprived group made painfully aware of their

denigration resort to building their path to social and political emancipation by emphasizing on their very distinctiveness. This is also elucidated by Tanweer Fazal (2015, pp. 3) who notes that while the nation-state at the visible level is conceived of as a politico-cultural idea integral to the state that could draw the cultural pluralities into civil society through secular institutions and organizations, it also operates as a politically majoritarian and culturally hegemonic institution as it seeks to integrate ethnic minorities into a national society conceived of in terms of the ideological and cultural proclivities of the dominant community.

This hegemonic role is not only reflected in the attitude of the state, but also its institutions. These ethnic minorities may possess the makings and markers of a nation themselves. Amalendu Guha (1979) hence notes two distinct levels of nationalism: one pan-Indian and the other, regional. The former was professedly based on observed pan-Indian homogeneities of culture such as a common all-India tradition and history, economic life and psychological make-up and the accepted unifying role of Sanskrit, Persian, English and Hindustani by turn, and also calculations of advantages of an India-wide market. The other consciousness was professedly based on the relevant region's distinctive homogeneities and demands for substantial or exclusive control by the sons of the soil over its resources and market facilities.

The pan-Indian stream of nationalism managed to assimilate all differences to project an image of oneness against foreign rule championed by the big Indian and petty bourgeoisie. Within the framework of moderate politics, it was the theory of pan-Indian nationhood that struck roots, as against the imperialist assertion that India's plural society lacked any kind of national consciousness whatsoever. The regional bourgeoisie of certain regions was more capable than their counterparts in availing the open market opportunities, and this explains the uneven development of nationalism in the country. The Indian National Congress deliberated upon issues of deemed national importance and it sought to maintain a secular and modernist stance. In the mean time, along with the existence of a regional nationalism, there existed another parallel of religious and linguistic nationalism that traced their roots to myths and historical narratives. Guha states, "In contrast to bonds of kinship (such as tribe, clan and caste) and religion, other identity marks remained dormant until the bourgeoisie of the 19th century picked them up to symbolize their people's territorial unity in order to forge solidarity on that basis. They formulated a political programme, however limited and deceptive, with a focus on



desirable structural changes, and they created mass sentiments in its favour”. Such construction of a pan-Indian-ism soon encountered problems for its “utter lack of concern for a federal scheme, universal adult suffrage and regional autonomy” (Guha, 1982, pp. 3).

What is true of the bigger nationalities is also largely true of the small nationalities, he contends, though they are relatively more isolated from the whole, because of their tribal ethnicity and/or habitat in difficult border terrains. Michael Hechter similarly argues that the uneven wave of modernization ensures the creation of more and less advanced groups. In a way, the big Indian bourgeoisie, the more advanced group seeks to regulate the allocation of resources and social roles to its benefit, while the less advanced groups are denied the access to these roles. This leads to the distinct ethnic identification of two groups; the big Indian bourgeoisie or the pan-Indian identity and the regional identity or the small and petty bourgeoisie. Or great nationalism and little nationalism, as Guha points out. In course of time, the anti-colonial united front of different ethnic groups dissolved to be replaced by ever-growing internal antagonism (Hechter, 1975, pp 11). Nationalities are in fact nothing but conflict groups if one is to observe sociologically (Wirth, 1936, pp. 724). “The self and group-consciousness generated by nationalistic movements correspond to the nature of the intergroup relationship that exists between one nationality and another” (ibid.). Through a process of consolidation and integration nationalism does manage to minimize rivalry and friction, but it also creates new conflict situations, both internal and external (Wirth, 1936, pp. 737). The nationalist movement that took birth among the socially dominant communities within the Old Order implied an antagonism to the forces that represented change, i.e. the lower caste, tribal and Muslim masses whose attempts at political emergence were looked upon as communalism, casteism, etc (Aloysius, 1993, pp. 6). The high-flown moral rhetoric, the quasi-religious issues and the spiritual-saintly style of Gandhian leadership had the dubious effect of de-politicizing the newly emerging ‘nation’ while simultaneously furthering the politico-economic prospects of the nationalists (ibid.).

Regional nationalisms or little nationalisms trace their history that tends to in most cases predate the independence period. This is illustrated in the case of Naga nationalism and religious nationalism which claims its legitimacy on the grounds of primordial ties, whilst linguistic nationalism like the Dravidian movement (which also was a reaction against the Brahminical

caste order) traces its roots to the establishment of Indian nationhood. It came about after independence with the ratification of Hindi as an official language. Further, the linguistic organization of states also brought up the question of unity among diversity; it failed to conjure up the image of India as a nation which would safeguard popular and mass interests, for it brought under the limelight its failure to do away with colonial legacies even after independence. An official region, after all, does not necessarily imply a regional consciousness corresponding to it (Baruah, 2005, pp. 4-5).

There have been wide debates on what the term 'North East India' means; is it merely a political term with geographic connotations or does it mean a conceptual category with historicity? The term is also popularly assumed to denote some form of homogeneity among its inhabitants. It is worth mentioning that the region became India's north east by historical accident; both the British and the Burmese occupation of erstwhile Assam was marked by rival contenders of the Ahom throne on whose invitations both the rulers came. Prior to the British conquest, the Mughals had time and again tried to annex the Ahom empire in today's Assam and neighbouring kingdoms but in vain. Had it not been the case otherwise, the region would have probably continued to exist sovereignly as one witness throughout history. During the British rule, the entire region came under one administrative authority, and this was the first time in history that all of what is today the northeast was clubbed under one ruler. Post independence, this was adopted by the Indian state that was making its best efforts to materialize project standardization of the constitution of Indian-ness. The term North-East hence points to no more than the area's location on India's political map. Such generic locational place-names are attractive to political engineers because they evoke no significant historical memory or collective consciousness (Baruah, 2005, pp. 05).

In the north eastern region, the colonial legacy of imposing cartographic dimensions on the movement of people as adopted by the Indian state encountered new challenges after the region witnessed mass identity movements. The anxiety on the part of the numerically small peoples of the northeast of becoming minorities in the territories that they have historically regarded as their own is a recurrent theme in the politics of the region (Baruah, 1999, pp. 14). Assam, no different from the rest of her sisters, also bore the brunt of the Indian state's insensitive policies. The

biggest challenge till date has been the anti-immigration mass movement that had not found highlight in the national limelight until the 1980s (Baruah, 2014).

There are two popular strands among scholars on Assamese nationalism; one believes that the Assamese had been exposed to the Vedic culture as the rest of the nation decades before the advent of the British, which is why there is a close affinity between the Assamese and the Indian. Udayon Mishra, a proponent of this discourse of thought, argues that since Assam had a close religious and cultural affinity to the Vedic tradition of India, it should not be clubbed together with the rest of the northeastern states of India. The Assamese, Gohain (1985, pp. 33) claims, have never felt an identity separate from India, unlike the Nagas and the Mizos, who have after all little in common with the Indian heritage. While another group of scholars believe that Assamese ethno-nationalism grew as a sharp reaction against the domination of the Bengali middle classes who had by the 19<sup>th</sup> century begun to occupy most important positions in the official job market.

Sanjib Baruah in his eminent work '*India Against Itself*' (1999) cites two references to the term sub-nationalism; first, to refer to a pattern of politicization and mobilization that meets some criteria of nationalism, but is not firmly committed to the idea of a separate statehood. Secondly, he contends that sub-nationalism in India stands in a dialogical relationship with pan-Indian politics; it is animated by India's constitution, laws, public philosophy and political processes. Of course his training as a political scientist guides him to term little nationalism as 'sub-nationalism', while in the works of other social scientists one may come across the term 'ethno-nationalism' that resonates in the same manner as the former.

Baruah further contends that any form of sub-nationalism must be treated in its historical context, just like nationalisms. Civil society, he argues, play a pivotal role in the formulation of political ideologies.

Organizations in Assam who claim to be non-political have led protests in the region, claiming to have a higher and non-condescending concern than those of politicians. Their members typically belong to the cultural realm and their call for a higher political order seeks to mobilize all the Assamese irrespective of their caste, class and ethnic affiliations. Though Assam is close

to Bengal, the character of the Vaishnava movement in Assam had been different from that of the Vaishnava movement in Bengal (op. cit, pp. 35). Assamese Vaishnava institutions for centuries had a more central role to play in society (ibid.).

“the Satras or monasteries were not retreats, but centres of learning and culture, and discharged important social functions... the vast majority of the Assamese Hindus were tribal converts assimilated in phases through the ministry of the satras. Besides, Assam managed to retain her independence from the successive medieval empires ruled from Delhi to the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (ibid, pp. 34).

In order to grasp the formation of Assamese nationalist ideals in the region, it is important to look at the historical factors that contribute to the same.

### **2.3 Political Economy of Assamese Ethno-nationalism**

In his book *“India Against Itself”* (1999) Sanjib Baruah notes two distinct processes undertaken by the British colonial administrators that had profound cultural and political implications for the region. The treaty of Yandaboo (1826) conferred all administrative functions of Assam to the British, and subsequently, they began to bring about economic and political changes in the north-east. The first significant step was undertaken in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the British officials decided to segregate the hills from the plains through the implementation of “Inner Line” through the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873. If one were to delve into historical records, one would find ample evidence to support the fact that the Assamese in the plains and the Nagas in the hills shared an economic, cultural and political relationship. The foothills were the spaces that were susceptible to interactions between both such that James Scott termed them as “no-state spaces” (Scott, 1998, pp. 186) implying the scarcity of population settlements and agriculture, hence they were not under any form of state administration. History also records the gifting of ‘*khats*’ to Nagas living near the foothills by the Ahom kings from time to time in order to ensure peaceful coexistence, however, the land belonged to the Ahom state.

With the coming of the British, changes in these historical relationships accompanied with the introduction of disconnectedness and strain between both the communities. The borders in those days were soft borders which were converted by the British into fixed or hard borders. The demarcation of boundaries by the colonial rulers was not based on historical continuities or

cultural contiguities, but served functional ends for them. The hill tribes were somewhat infuriated by the expansion of British entrepreneurs into the hill lands and this threatened their political ties; the Nagas were known to be responsive to colonial domination. In this manner, no outsider could thus be allowed to cross the line without a license. This law became etched in history as a beginning point in which two communities with commercial and political ties got segmented into two distinct nationalities.

The second aspect of colonial geography of Assam that had significant long term cultural and political implications that resonate till date was the inclusion of Assam as an administrative extension of Bengal until 1874. After that Assam became a separate province but also included the Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet. From 1837 to 1873 Bengali was the medium of instruction. In addition to this, the British also encouraged large scale migration from Bengal to Assam, and this reflected in the demographic changes over the decades. Initially it was for the interest of tea garden plantations that labourers from Bengal and Sylhet were brought in, and later on, the Bengali middle classes exposed to western education system were provided with jobs in the administration and railways in Assam. This created a fear among the native Assamese of linguistic erosion of becoming minorities in their home. The first wave of Assamese nationalism can be described as an offshoot of this tension, when the Assamese public intellectuals aided by the Baptist Missionaries began to convince the administrators of their distinct identity. Gohain asserts that the Assamese nationality had to overcome several obstacles during its growth and development which left behind a legacy of bitterness and anger. First, it was the imposition of the alien rule by the colonial rulers as the official language. Second, they tagged large Bengali speaking territories for administrative convenience to Assam without any regard for the sentiments of either nationality, hence encouraging active resentment towards each other.

Both these decisions taken by the colonial administrators served as ignition for the contentious politics of the region we witness today, with special reference to Nagaland and Assam's immigration situation. For the purpose of the study under consideration too, these historical conditions should be looked at as incidents that reshaped the political history of Assam's demography and its policies. The colonial policy of settling the communities to their supposed

homelands or provision of ‘protected enclaves’ for the safe practice of indigenous practices were no more instrumental for the ‘protected’ than for themselves. The ethnic organization of the hills has an affinity with the slash and burn cultivation, requiring the communities to move from one place to another (Baruah, 2005, pp. 08). These mobile populations could not be induced towards corvee labour or military service, nor could they be monitored or taxes be collected from them in a uniform manner<sup>2</sup>. Therefore the establishment of the line system and the transportation of required labour force from Bengal into Assam and Naga administrative areas was no accident, but was propelled by self-interests of the East India company.

Both Guha and Wirth recognize the potentially chauvinist attitude of not only big nationalism but also small or little nationalisms themselves. As Michel Hechter’s internal colonialism and the dependency theory explicates, uneven development leads to uneven power distribution. This is also evident in between states; the classes most exposed to forms of capital intensive resources are the ones exercising ideological control over the rest, both at the state and regional level. Guha’s essay titled ‘*Little nationalism turned Chauvinist*’(1980) precisely drives home this argument that some form of assimilation of identities or rights under one banner is a characteristic feature of any form of nationalism, as in the case of Assamese nationalism. Baruah augments this by forwarding Jalal’s argument that India’s retrospectively constructed official nationalism seeks to ignore and delegitimize the multiple alternative strands of popular nationalism and communitarianism that lost out in the final battle for the state (cited in Baruah, 2014). He further writes that while the Assamese case draws attention to the cracks in the imagination of hegemony-seeking pan-Indian elites, it also provides a dramatic example of an internal challenge to the self-representation of Assamese nationality (1999, pp. 9). Political mobilizations, after all, in support of homelands produce counter-mobilization by those who fear subordinate status in those homelands (Baruah, 2005, pp. 11). The Bodo demand for a separate homeland reflects this statement.

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<sup>2</sup> James Scott in his book “*The Art of Not Being Governed*” argues that the *zomia* population, i.e. highlanders of South East Asia, had elaborate mechanisms whereby they evaded from being ruled by the state, and indulging in slash-and-burn cultivation was one way of not having to pay taxes or come under the radar of state officials who tried to monitor the potential subjects.

## 2.4 Locating Peasant Struggles

Sociological discourse on the mobilization of groups and individuals situate consciousness in a wide array of social discrimination, marginalization and the largely impending hand of the state. Sajal Nag in his essay titled *Multiplication of Nations? Political Economy of Sub-nationalism in India* (1993) briefly recounts how the Nehru led government after independence sought to project homogenization and project nation over all other linguistic and ethnic affinities. For a nation that had just come out of colonial rule, suffered the trauma of partition and was still unconsolidated, 'the first thing is the security and stability of the country'; strong India had to be built before its component parts could be considered (ibid. pp 1526). Nationalist and separatist claims after independence displayed the hollowness of the bourgeois call for the anti-colonial struggle.

The agendas of the big Indian and regional bourgeoisie also failed to mobilize the peasantry until the scenario changed with the advent of Gandhi. Prior to 1918, before the augment of Gandhi's leadership and the Congress championing peasant demands on a wider forum, peasant struggles in India were nothing more than isolated struggles (Hardiman, 1992, pp. 1). Hardiman recounts the existence of two theories that help to address why the peasantry allied with the nationalist call for independence- religious and factional. The first theory demonstrates how the peasants are taken in by some personality akin to 'religious' and spiritual figure (like Gandhi), and the second point out to the existence of local level factions that mobilize the peasants, based on primordial ties like that of caste. Both these theories strongly undermine the capability of the peasantry as a conscious category, by defining them solely in terms of being easily mobilized by some outside element to join the nationalist movement. They are commonly viewed as enthralled within grips of religion and caste structures. Such kind of circumscribed theorizing also fails to look at the internal differentiation among the peasantry. From the 1960s however, Hardiman notes an interest beginning to emerge in the peasantry as the subjects of their own history, and not as objects of colonial rule. This can be attributed to the fact that a class of richer peasants with access to high yielding crops and ownership of their own lands had emerged out of the economic infrastructural impetus provided by the British. Historians argue that these better-off peasants used ties of patronage, caste and religion to force the rest of the peasants in representing/participating in the class interests of the former. As a result, the normal unit of

peasant mobilization was the faction-consisting of a rich peasant and his clients and his dependents amongst the poor. This distinction among the peasant society is also evident among the villagers in the temporary villages; interests, as we shall see in the third chapter, are represented in the assertions they make.

Dhanagare (1973) raises some pertinent questions that are highly conducive to our present analysis: first, what role do different classes of peasants play in a movement? Secondly, what kinds of social structure and historical circumstances are conducive to peasant revolts and protests? He states that while each social movement has certain common as well as unique features, it is a product of peculiar historical circumstances. The phenomena of socio-political movements are processus or diachronic in the sense they signify a sequence of events or a process in time; therefore, each synchronic event in the course of the development of a movement may bear some relationship with the antecedent and is likely to influence if not determine the subsequent events.

It is mostly, Rupert Emerson (1960) claims, the urban and somewhat industrialized areas which are the centres of nationalist aspirations, as it is the urban workers, torn from their traditional roots, and not the settled peasantry who are the first followers of the nationalist leaders. Such articulations were also made by Gellner who argued that in agrarian societies the primary function of culture is to define the social status, hence culture seldom coincides with political boundaries (Gellner, 1994, pp. 29). This kind of contention runs into trouble with peasants being articulated as the markers of their own history as in Vietnam and China; in these countries, the peasantry allied with the numerically weaker industrial proletariat. Barrington Moore suggests that the nature of the power structure and alignments of social classes largely determine the form in which the revolutionary potential of any class would ultimately manifest itself and contribute to change (cited in Saikia, 1996). Arupjyoti Saikia (1996) argues that historical discourse on the peasants as a category began to be seen as a viable threat to the Indian state by virtue of their antagonistic position against zamindars and moneylenders who form the nexus of agents of nationalist consolidation. There are three major trends in peasant historiography according to him- imperialist, nationalist and Marxist. The imperialist school views peasant rebellion as a disruption of law and order having the potential of posing a serious threat to the colonial state. The nationalist historiography found peasant rebellion as an outcome of colonial rule with its



increased rent and taxation system; this discontent, in turn, got stimulated by the Indian national movement. The Marxist school sees peasant rebellion as a form of class antagonism, between landlords, moneylenders and peasants (Saikia, 1996, pp. 8).

Partha Chatterjee (1988) recounts the existence of a structure of duality in the nationalist mass movement. Two domains of politics, one where formally organized political parties and organizations began to show their representative power over the mass of people to establish a bourgeois nation state, and the other the domain of peasant politics which only appear as a realm of spontaneity, whose actions and beliefs did not fit into the grid of “interests” of the bourgeois representative politics. Dhanagare also proclaims that studies on peasant movements and other sociopolitical movements are analysed in a ‘class’ framework. Though Marx himself completely disregarded the role of the peasantry in the struggle over control of the means of production, Engels was well aware of the internal differentiation of the peasant society. For him, the peasantry, however, remained “unorganized and politically impotent” unless mobilized by the organized working class (cited in Dhanagare, 1983, pp. 2). The revolutionary potential, Dhanagare argues, of the peasantry was well discussed in the early Marxist tradition, but its potential for political and collective organization was underestimated.

Community consciousness is very different from bourgeois consciousness. The latter operates from the premise of the individual and a notion of his or her interests, with solidarities being based on common interests. On the other hand, in peasant consciousness, people are required to act together because of existing bonds of solidarity (Chatterjee, 1988, pp. 11). Eric Stokes similarly argue that the supra-village organization of the clan community and its capacity to unite against what was conceived of as external threat whether coming from the Government, rebel, taxman, or urban creditor was a characteristic feature of all peasant agitations. This capacity for local combination on clan or caste lines is an ingredient in all important peasant organizations (Stokes, 1976, pp. 274). The agrarian scenario in Assam is predominantly influenced by the existence of ‘*raij mel*’ (peoples’ meeting) which are old political and social institutions at the village level. These have played a historic role in the peasant assertions/movements in Assam, as will be discussed in the second chapter. Economic discontent in terms of revenue paved the path for political consciousness and both together led to organized challenge to the British rule.

Peasants in Assam hence were not entirely victims of a wider structural weakness in relation to the state, and other political factions.

## **2.5 Ethnic Nationalism in the North-east**

Michel Hechter in his theory on internal colonialism had described national development as a process in which the separate cultural identities of regions begin to lose social significance and becomes blurred. The one *national* culture begins to envelop all local and regional cultures and maintains its identity by encompassing across previous distinctions. The core and the peripheral cultures must ultimately merge into one cultural system to which all members of the society have primary identification and loyalty (Hechter, 1975). The Indian state led by the Indian National Congress post independence took it upon itself to bring justice to the construction of one-nation through ‘unity among diversity’, and in the process pacifying diverse cultural and linguistic groups who were rallying for their respective causes. For Ernest Gellner, nationalism is a sociological condition brought about by the advent of modernisation, with cultural homogeneity, a formal education system and linguistic standardization feeding the legitimacy of the modern nation. Nationalism in India, to be equated with anti-colonial movement, possessed the same fervour as the above definition. But one quick and close look at the ground reality portrays a stark contrast to what Hechter, Gellner and the Indian state had in mind.

As reiterated elsewhere, the colonial policy of fixing communities in the northeast to their supposed habitat or ‘homelands’ not only led to the segregation of the hills and plains but after Independence also began to play havoc to the region’s socio-political landscape. It also fed the space-centric homeland policies pursued by the post-colonial Indian state furthering thereby the divide between communities and individuals. Ethnic divides frequented through ethnic conflicts are no rare incidents in the region, each conflict executed through the process of identifying the “other”. Since ethnic groups have all the makings of a nation, the politics of space-centered ethnic clashes bearing historical and mythical claims bring forth an interesting dimension to our study- the politics of nationalizing space. The creation of separate state of Nagaland in 1963 could be cited as an example in this context. Duly formed out of the erstwhile Naga Hills District, the nationalist movements of the state has time and again brought forth a larger call for

the carving out of a separate and autonomous state of ‘Nagalim’ out of Naga inhabited areas of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh including Nagaland (this call was made in 1964, 1970, 1994, 2003 and in recent years by the Nagaland assembly). Trying to trace the history of Nagas inhabitation in these full-fledged states of India, the leaders of the movement lay claims to pre-colonial kingship jurisdictions and territoriality. As Kumar (2012) remarks, “It has become customary for an indigenous ethnic group today to lay claim to a particular territory on the basis of the fact that it once ruled that territory”. The States Reorganization Commission (1956) had recommended the merger of Assam and all other political entities in the northeast (ibid.). This soon failed once the different groups began to assert for exclusivist ethno-nationalistic approach for the devolution of political power (ibid.). The carving out of the other five states from Assam failed to pacify the now numerically smaller groups. For instance, the demand for a separate Kuki inhabited state in Manipur, Bodoland by the Bodos in Assam, Kamatapur by the Koch-Rajbongshis amongst others reflect the callousness with which the state tried to compromise the various separate ethno-nationalist claims.

A close observation of the Indian nationality formation too brings out the compromise brought forward by the Nehru led government on the part of the regional, linguistic and religious groups pressing for their own territorial jurisdiction. In the northeast too, the Naga National Council had pronounced a sovereign state of Nagaland, but they were consolidated with the Union of India. It was one of the earliest challenges to the nation –building project in India (Misra, 2014, pp. 9). Those who had taken over power from the British at Delhi and were immersed in the streams of Indian cultural nationalism were not in a position to acknowledge the different strands of alternative nationalism that were present in the northeastern part of the country (ibid.). Against this backdrop of nationalist movements across the northeast, one can recall how the call for Assamese ethno-nationalism during the colonial period was also a reaction against the inclusion of Assam under the Bengal administrative unit, and subsequently in the post colonial period against the immigration issue that would be subsequently discussed in detail in the latter chapters.

The process of immigration is closely interlinked with another very significant concept, citizenship. It is the state which decides who are citizens, denizens or ‘second-class’ citizens.

Politics of nationalities very often incorporate questions of citizenship. Assamese ethno-nationalism in the 1980s was a sharp reaction against the large scale immigration, from Sylhet and other parts of West Bengal; it was alleged that there was a sharp demographic increase in the number of immigrants, especially of Bengali-origin Muslims and Nepalis who had begun to inhabit the lands of the indigenous and the state. Baruah (1986, pp. 1189) notes that the leaders of the Assam movement demanded that all immigrants from foreign countries, except those who were legally granted citizenship, are illegal aliens and hence should be identified and deported. They relied upon the census date of 1971 to assert their claims. Upon no interest being shown by the Indian state on the question of preservation of resources and the issue of 'rightful' citizenship, the leaders of the movement called out for a boycott of the 1979 parliamentary elections for the number of registered voters were observed to have significantly grown. They developed a series of protests and demonstrations to pressurize the government to identify and deport illegal immigrants. It culminated with the signing of the Assam Accord between the leaders of the movement (All Assam Students Union and the Asom Gana Parishad) and the central government in the presence of then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Accordingly, 24<sup>th</sup> March 1971 became the cut-off year date which the migrants who had immigrated to Assam would be detected and deported. In the course of the movement, it is important to note, the hostility was turned towards the Bengali Muslims instead of the Nepalis who (being Hindus themselves) were found to pose no significant threat to the Assamese cultural nationality. The anti-Muslim rhetoric was a result of the partition of Bengal which had left a bitter taste among the state's ethnic composition. Meanwhile, the ethnic political leadership too pursued cultural policies after Independence that sought to define the state of Assamese (Baruah, 1986, pp. 1190).

It is against this background that the study of peasant nationalism in the temporary villages situated along the border areas of Assam and Nagaland is to be examined. The process of immigration to these villages brought forth a new dimension to the tussle between the state and the agencies for the promulgation of land rights- the question of identity. Since the inhabitants of these villages are mostly migrant populations, the question of who is an Asamiya plays a preponderant role when the solution to tackling the problem of eviction is discussed. The tribal inhabitants are treated in a similar manner as the "illegal" immigrants by the state, being forcefully evicted out of their tents. The idea of an *Asamiya* is strongly derived from the agendas of the Assam Accord, whereby the identifications of citizens from non-citizens amongst the

population inhabiting these villages became rooted in the colonial period which is when these formal divisions began to take shape.

## Chapter 3

### Peasant Nationalism in India and Assam

The study of mass movements that have hitherto dominated the sociology of social movements undertook a turn in the lens of the historiography of the same. As opposed to the study of nationalist movements from 'above', the call of the last few decades have been to devote as much interest on the historiography from the 'below', i.e., the not-so popular movements of the 'sub-altern' or the general masses which find little or no resonance in the popular historical materials. The sub-altern school, influenced by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci in the West questions the 'elitist' ideology of the nationalist movement in the country by bringing forth the analysis of those revolts and assertions against the British and local exploiters which are otherwise, for the lack of a better term, treated as isolated and spontaneous episodes. Peasant studies feature centrally in these analyses and attention began to be devoted to the socio-political role of the peasantry in the Indian national movement.

James Scott (1977, pp. 267) proclaimed the peasantry and not the proletariat have constituted the decisive social base of most 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutions. In his essay titled *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (2008) Scott recounts two instances when the peasantry finds mention in the historical and archival materials: one, when it poses a threat to the state and the existing politico-social order, and second, as contributors to statistics on conscription, taxes, labour migration, land holdings and crops production. Small episodes of rebellion that catch the attention of the state and ruling classes find mention in the historical records, while guerrilla revolts that take place every day find no mention even though they may have a more profound impact on common lives. By "everyday forms of peasant resistance" he refers to the constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, rent, taxes and interest from them. Foot dragging, arson, sabotage, dissimulation, feigned ignorance and so on are the weapons of these relatively 'powerless' groups.

Historically, according to Debal K. Singha Roy, peasants have had paradoxical social identities. In social science literature they have been depicted on one hand as reactionary, conservative, awkward, homologous, incomplete part-society and dependent; on the other as revolutionary, progressive, self-conscious, heterogeneous and self-sufficient social categories with the potential

for autonomous action" (2004, pp. 15). History and social science, written by an intelligentsia based on written records produced largely by the literate officials themselves, is simply not well equipped to uncover the silent and anonymous forms of class struggle which typify the peasantry (op. cit.). This unlikely cabal contributes to an understanding of the peasantry as a class which alternates between long periods of abject passivity and brief, violent and futile explosions of rage (op. cit.).

Scott's argument that it is the peasantry which brings about successful revolutions lay on his contention that hegemonic forms of formal institutions hardly seep into the everyday life of the village unit. It is only the religious institution which percolates down to the bottom; through the intermediaries which are not agents of the centre but of the local social structure. The proletariat, therefore, is fatally compromised because it is 'organically linked' to the capitalist class, whereas the peasantry is not similarly linked to a superior class because of its relative economic autonomy as a food producer (Evans, 1987, pp. 196-197) and cultural autonomy stemming from its social base, the village community, which is both functionally and historically prior to the city (Scott, 1977, pp. 276).

He further argues that links of kinship, faction, patronage and ritual ties create obstacles to collective action. These ties operate nearly without exception to the advantage of the richer farmers by creating a relationship of dependence that restrains the prudent poor man or woman from acting in definite class terms (Scott, 2008, pp. 14). Barrington Moore in a very similar tone attributes the weakness of the peasant movements to the caste system with its hierarchical divisions and the strength of the bourgeois leadership against the landlords and the British, and the pacifying influence of Gandhi on the peasantry (cited in Gough, 1974). Such contention depicts the inability of the peasantry to organize collectively for its own purposes; an external agent is presumably required to bring about social consciousness, precisely what the sub-altern school questions. Scott's arguments run into trouble too for he seems to suggest that state institutions have not percolated to the village life (Evans, 1987). Kathleen Gough concludes that the limitations of the peasantry lie in the broader political forces at the level of the province and the colonial and the post-colonial state rather than from the caste system or from peculiarities of village structures (op. cit.). For instance, in British writings, peasant uprisings figure as

“communal riots” between major religions, fanatical religious cults, or criminal activities of castes and tribes.

### **3.1 Sociological Analysis of the Peasant**

Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, peasant protests were pre-political in the sense that they were not addressed to the future of the nation-state, hence doomed as revolutions. However, their concern was to establish a new state of peasant society which would combine freedom from alien rule together with some traditional virtues and modern technology and popular government rather than reverting to pre-British structures. Kathleen Gough (1974, pp. 1391- 1412) cites five types of popular peasant uprisings during the British rule: *restorative* rebellions to drive out the British and restore earlier rulers and social relations, *religious* movements for the liberations of a region or an ethnic group under a new form of government, *social banditry*, *terrorist vengeance* with ideas of meting out collective justice, and *mass insurrections* for the address of particular grievances. Gough notes that peasant revolts in India since the 1920s have been coordinated with the policies of oppositional political parties. On the one hand, there have been political movements for independence or for national or regional autonomy among blocks of tribal peoples; and on the other, peasant uprisings which were primarily class struggles and were guided by one or another of India’s communist parties.

While Karl Marx ascribed a secondary social class status to the peasantry that exists outside the economic class system of the capitalist class system, he saw in it a potential ally of the proletariat working class movement. The peasantry, he thought, would be drawn into the revolution through growing capitalist penetration into the French countryside, and thus would become ‘rural proletariat’. He notes, “..the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class” (Marx, 1963:124) reflecting on the weakness of the peasant structure and values to constitute a revolutionary consciousness. Engels, on the other hand, recognized the internal differentiation among the peasantry and viewed farm-labourers rather than tenant-farmers or peasant proprietors as the ally of the proletariat revolution. Classical Marxian formulations on the peasantry hence treat the peasantry



in a reclusive manner, one that is backward and therefore needs to be drawn into the class system by the agents of revolution with the development of capitalism.

The critical implication of hegemony is that the class rule is affected not so much by sanctions and coercion, rather by the consent and passive compliance of subordinate classes (Scott, 1977). Gramsci has, in brief, described the institutional basis of “false-consciousness” (of the peasantry). Distinguishing between thought and action, he argues that at the level of concrete action of workers may suggest radical consciousness, but underneath at the level of ideas, the realm of which belongs to consciousness, they are nothing but passive recipients of the consciousness of the values and perceptions percolated from above (cited in Scott, 1977). The function of the revolutionary class hence is to provide the peasantry with the conceptual apparatus and “critical consciousness” it cannot produce autonomously. Scott brings out that the radical potential of the peasantry lies not only in their isolated and communal social organization, but above all in their normative culture which is antithetical to the values of the hegemonic institutions. This antithesis stems from the moral economy of the peasantry in the aspects of religion and politics. For instance, their local system of action based on status, influence and authority (in other words, forms of exercise of power) seeks to constitute a distinct sphere of perception, information and moral obligation which is exclusive of outsiders. He further argues that local authorities are expected to settle disputes internally upholding the values and traditions of the peasant life world, and keep statistical data on land and revenue from the scope of external agents. As Scott’s work extensively leads him to depict the peasantry as a category that struggles to remain ‘stateless’, it is therefore hardly a surprise when he contends that peasant protests are collective efforts to preserve pre-capitalist communal rights against the interventions of the state and capitalism.

As reiterated elsewhere in this work, religion seems to be for Scott the important hegemonic institution that delves into the peasant lives through local figures. Perhaps Gandhi was a similar spiritual-saintly figure for them which was why they rallied to his nationalist cause for independence. However, reasoning thus leads one to fall into the same trap which nationalist historians and other social scientists have been accused of falling into: that of undermining the ability of the peasantry for collective mobilization. It would be equally absurd to conclude that religion, as practiced by the elites, would have the same effect on the peasantry who nevertheless

enjoy a level of autonomy that adherents to the 'great tradition' will seldom have compliance to. The other widely held belief that peasants are mobilized largely by local faction-like groups of individuals based on caste or kin members who themselves serve as intermediaries between the elites and the masses is equally ignorant of the fact that there is internal differentiation among the peasantry. David Hardiman's work (1992, pp. 1- 55) explicates this in detail. His focus of the study is the rich farmer who is most likely to be the subjects of their own history. He argues that peasant farmers who sought to free themselves from the domination of the superior classes such as the landlords and merchant money-lenders, to maximize their profits from agricultural farming for the market should be described as the 'rich peasant' and not the class of rural landlords. His definition of the rich peasants hence connotes those who are independent land owners, producing solely for profits incurred from the market.

He lists down four types of peasant resistances or revolts in colonial India: between peasants and planters, between peasants and landlords, peasants against moneylenders, and finally peasants against tax collectors. In the first type, he exemplifies how planters provided money to the peasants to pay off their debts to the zamindars, on the understanding that they would cultivate indigo on a certain proportion of their land and hand over the harvested produce to the factory. They would be bound by contracts, failing which they would be subjected to severe coercive measures. The Indigo revolt of 1859 in Bengal materialized out of this exploitation of the peasants, as well as the landlords whose lands the planters began to occupy. The Bengal government refused to help these classes, and conflict arose between the peasants and planters. In the second type, he looks at the series of agitations in Bengal in the 1870s when the landlords began to push up rents from the tenants, demanding extra charges and reclassifying land rights to serve the interest of themselves and to the disadvantage of the peasants. Extraction of charges was done through both legitimate ways like filing cases in the British court of law, or through illegitimate means such as exercising coercion. He also looks at the Mapilla revolts where the peasants were stripped off their occupancy rights by the British and became tenants-at-will.

The third category of peasants' revolt was against the moneylenders in Maharashtra in 1875. Better known as the Deccan revolt of Pune, it was a movement against the sahuikars, who had on the pretext of debt collection occupied many peasants' lands reducing them just to tenants from owners. On 12<sup>th</sup> May, peasants gathered from the surrounding villages and attacked the shops of

the sahumars, looting them and also burning a house down. Other villages in the neighbourhood followed suit and it soon turned into a widespread agitation, even though no sahumar was physically harmed. Marwari and Gujarati sahumars too began to be targeted. The objective of these rioters was to obtain and destroy the bonds, decrees, etc. in the possession of their creditors. The fourth type of peasant resistance was centred on the non-payment of taxes. In the history of kingship in India, there were many instances of peasants refusing to pay land tax to the ruler, with strong political implications. By paying tax to a particular ruler, peasants in effect acknowledged the legitimacy of the ruler. In 1857, the last major revolt of this kind happened with the Sepoy Mutiny. The agitation of 1873-74 out of increased tax reforms in Bombay Presidency led to the refusal to pay taxes by those whose crops had failed and suffered hardship, but also those who could not pay. No tax movement had in 1907 taken place in Punjab

Ranajit Guha's work "Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India" is path breaking for laying down a conceptual framework that would give the peasant due recognition as a subject of history in his own right even for a project that was all his own (1983, pp. 03). To acknowledge the peasant as a maker of his own rebellion is to attribute a consciousness to him for which he used the term "insurgency" (ibid.). It refers to that consciousness which informs the activity of the rural masses known otherwise as revolt, uprising, etc. and hence rejects the idea that such activity is purely spontaneous (ibid., pp. 04). He identified six core elements that reflect peasant consciousness under five headings: negation, ambiguity, solidarity, transmission and territoriality. He begins by stating that peasant identity is created through power nexus, viz. those who had power over him by virtue of class, caste and official standing (1983, pp. 18). His identity is hence the sum total of his subalternity (ibid.). His identity is hence shaped by differential status than his superiors, i.e. negation of the attributes and properties of them. By ambiguity, he means a form of 'inversion' or 'turning things upside down' in which peasants commit small acts of violence in such a way as to amount to turning things upside down for the dominant society (pp. 77).

It is a political struggle in which the rebel appropriated and or destroyed the insignia of his enemy's power and hoped thus to abolish marks of his own subalterns (pp. 75). By rising in revolt the peasant involved himself in a project which was by its very nature negatively constituted (ibid.). The third element is modality, whereby the peasant selectively chooses

confrontation with his target, mostly a dominant agent in the society<sup>3</sup>. The fourth, solidarity, is a categorical imprint of peasant consciousness that almost every rebellion bears. It represents the rebel's consciousness of his own activity, and at the same time separates his own consciousness from his activity completely and unequivocally from its understanding by its enemies (pp. 169). In this, the peasant finds a unified support in the form of class or community solidarities against a common enemy. Transmission is the spread of peasant violence in pre-literate society through signs and symbols. This implied that rebel messages circulated more by spoken utterance than writing, through archaic and traditional forms unintelligible to the British rulers (pp. 226-7). All messages had dual functions- to communicate as well as to mobilize. The last element, territoriality, defines the boundaries of peasant insurgency. It refers to the consciousness that made up, for the rebels, a sense of belonging to a particular lineage as well as to a common habitat (pp. 279). Territoriality as an intersection between ethnic space and physical space is highly conducive to the present study.

### **3.2 Defining the Peasant: The Internal Differentiation**

When one conceptualizes 'peasant' as a subject of enquiry, one must simultaneously engage in the processes of segmentation and differentiation of the peasant societies. These processes are largely the results of occupational diversification, technological innovation, penetration of the global market economy, environment degradation, demographic transition, state policies on rural development and agriculture, spread of industrialization and means of communication and so on. Scott's analysis incites the readers to believe that institutions of the state have hardly penetrated to the villages which in a way preserve their economic and social autonomy. Far from the truth, the above-mentioned processes are taken cognizance of when scholars define the peasantry. In terms of locational and occupational boundaries, peasants inhabit the rural areas and cultivate land. Complex and highly stratified, they include groups, classes and categories which cannot be classified entirely as peasants (cited in Roy, 2004: 16). For instance, those who are engaged in non-agricultural labour or those who work in cities on a periodic basis are to be typified as what?

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<sup>3</sup> <http://readingfanon.blogspot.in/2011/09/elementary-aspects-of-peasant.html>

Teodor Shanin (1971), Robert Redfield (1956), Chayanov (1966), Eric Wolf (1984) among others broadly defined peasants as those who are engaged in agricultural activities, and those who produce for their subsistence. Social isolation and economic marginalization are two themes recurrent in their analysis of the peasantry. It was Lenin who dispatched with the belief that the differentiated nature of the peasantry lies not only in the unequal holding of land and income, but also on the degree of contact with the market.

Scholarly literature on the role of peasants in the Chinese Revolution is indoctrinated to the contribution of Mao TseTung, the revolutionary leader of the Communist Party. He felt that it was the landlord class which hindered the development of all the productive forces in China (1977, pp. 16). Whereas, the semi-proletariat, under which Mao categorizes the vast and overwhelming number of peasants in the countryside, due to their next to deplorable economic status, posses the strongest of tendencies to involve in the revolution. For Mao, this peasantry consists of semi-owner peasants and poor peasants.

“The semi-owner peasants are worse off than the owner-peasants because every year they are short of about half the food they need, and have to make up this deficit by renting land from others, selling part of their labour power, or engaging in petty trading... the poor peasants own no land, and receive only half the harvest or even less for their year’s toil, while the semi-owner peasants, though receiving only half or less than half the harvest of land rented from others, can keep the entire crop from the land they own. The semi-owner peasants are therefore more revolutionary than the owner-peasants, but less revolutionary than the poor peasants. The poor peasants are tenant-peasants who are exploited by the landlords.” (Mao, 1977, pp. 16-17).

The interest of scholars on the study of agrarian movements began to delve into the segmentation of the same. Exploring the classes that were mostly instrumental in the revolutions of Algeria, Russia and Vietnam, the middle peasant thesis began to be popular among social scientists. Eric Wolf explicates that the ‘poor peasant’ or the ‘landless labourer’ who depends on the landlord for rent is least exposed to the currents of revolution. It is the middle peasant who is relatively more vulnerable to the economic changes brought about by commercialization. He defines the middle peasant as one who “has secure access to land of his own and cultivates it with family labour” (Wolf, 1971, pp. 290). Hamza Alavi (1979) in a similar tone distinguishes between three types of peasants: first, landlords who give out their land for cultivation to ‘*poor peasants*’ consisting of landless tenants, mostly sharecroppers. The second category consists of the independent landholders who own no more land than they can cultivate themselves and is

enough to make them self-sufficient; these are the '*middle peasants*' and they do not require the labour of others. The third category consists of *rich capitalist farmers* who own a substantial amount of land and give wage labour to labourers. D. N. Dhanagare adopted the middle peasant thesis promulgated by Wolf. He explicates in detail the role of the rich farmers and the middle peasants in the protests and movements undertaken by the peasants. He detailed how Gandhi realized the importance of the non-elite groups in the call for independence. However, because the socio-cultural scenario in India is far more complex than that of Russia and elsewhere since caste, religion and ethnic groups (status groups) influence the lives of the masses to a large extent, the categorization into rich, middle and poor peasants would be too reductionist to put the complicated context to use.

Dhanagare also examines the emergence and the role of *kisan sabhas* which were class based peasant organizations in local and regional basis in India. In the decades between 1920-1950, Dhanagare argues "the term 'Peasant movement' or 'Agrarian movement' as a blanket term refers to all kinds of collective attempts of different strata of the peasantry either to change the system which they felt was exploitative, or to seek redress for particular grievances without necessarily aiming at overthrowing the system. The two terms used interchangeably thus refers to all kinds of resistance movements, violent or non-violent, organized or spasmodic, pre-political or political" (Dhanagare, 1983, pp. 19).

He makes few tentative generalizations about the peasant organizations that developed and declined in India between 1925 and 1947 (*ibid.*, pp. 148-149) that are pertinent to this analysis. Firstly, peasant organizations were basically the result of agrarian agitations rather than 'party' or 'organization' in the strict sense of the term. Secondly, peasant organizations almost always suffered from an identity crisis and hence searched for recognition from or affiliations to one or the other national political party- whether the Congress, Socialist or Communist parties. Thirdly, caste identity and solidarity played a role in the take-off stage of the peasant organization but later on it is replaced with class interests. Fourthly, the peasant organizations only remained a regional success rather than all-Indian one. Fifthly, the leadership of these was provided by the well-to-do, middle peasants, or the urban middle class including professionals, the intelligentsia and the politicians.

The involvement of the peasantry in the Indian national movement became vital for it allows us to engage with the changes brought about in the economy under the British rule. Prior to the advent of the British, there was state ownership of land. The villagers performed cultivation on these lands out of which one part of the produce was to be given to the king, with no occupancy rights. With the British came the introduction of private proprietorship, thus control over land was handed over to non-agriculturists like zamindars, money-lenders, trades and the landed gentry, leading to the creation of a heterogenous class society. Changes in the manner of taxation, the introduction of the land settlements like the Zamindari, Mahalwari and Ryotwari system, led to the increasing impoverishment of those who were engaged in the agricultural sector, and a growing class division.

A. R. Desai (1948, pp. 176) lists the new social classes that formed in the rural areas: *zamindars* created by the British government, *absentee landlords*, *tenants* under zamindars and absentee landlords, the class of *peasant proprietors* divided into upper- lower- middle strata, agricultural labourers, the modern class of *merchants* and the modern class of *moneylenders*. It was mostly the tenants who had to carry out the burden of excessive taxation and fines. As a result, we find numerous revolts and protests in the 19th century against the atrocities committed against them by both the British and their agents like the rich zamindars who began to thrive economically on the taxes collected from them. Desai is of the opinion that the peasant proprietors developed national consciousness earlier than the tenants, for the former were directly linked up with and had to deal with the state to which it paid the land tax; the tenants, on the other hand, came into conflict with the zamindars over the question of rent and not the state (Desai, 1948, pp. 187). Santhal uprisings of 1855-56, Indigo revolt of 1859-60, Deccan riots of 1875, Phulaguri and Patharughat revolts in Assam (1861 & 1894) are some of the popular movements against the aforesaid changes.

Uday Mehta's article titled 'Peasant Movement in India' (1979, pp. 743) looks at the evolution of the same in India. He divides the phenomena into three distinct phases: the initial phase (1857-1921) was characterized by the presence of sporadic protests and lack of proper leadership, the second (1923-1946) is characterized by the growth of class conscious peasant organization, and the third is the post independence period which witnesses large scale agrarian movements which sprung up with the inability of the government to address important issues of

the masses in India. N. G. Ranga in his essay “Indian Peasants’ Struggles and Achievements” sketches the argument that the peasant protests not only succeeded in bringing to the white men’s notice the capability of non-violent call for independence but also led to the establishment of separate panchayats at the local level for efficient political, judicial and administrative ends (cited in Saikia, 2013). Mridula Mukherjee (2004) is another important historian whose work has enriched a critique of the given theoretical frameworks that treat the peasantry in the revolutionary transformations in the world, particularly as an apolitical entity entrenched in traditional virtues.

To interrogate the peasant movements in alienation from the socio-economic and political context of the nation will be a mockery of their potentiality to demonstrate and protest. A proper analysis of such movements can be made only in the total background of agrarian social structure, economic pressures and political sentiments of the group concerned (Karna, 1989, pp. 04). Patricio Silva in an essay on peasant unions in Chile explains how the development of Chilean rural unionism has been conditioned by and subordinated to the political and economic needs of the dominant sector controlling the state apparatus (Silva, 1988, pp. 433). In India, questions relating to the institutional structures evolved under the British regime acted as an ignition point for the beginning of peasant protests. Karna notes that a peasant movement independent of the national freedom struggle was never conceived of by the Kisan Sabha leaders.

Dhanagare’s thesis on the Tebhaga movement (1946-47) discerns of the movement as the first consciously attempted revolt by a politicized peasantry in Indian history. Led by the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party of India, this movement was the most intense and widespread of all the agitations launched by the peasants of Bengal in the pre-independence days (op. cit, pp. 7).

### **3.3 An Analysis of the Peasant Mobilizations in Assam**

The rural-agrarian setting in Assam has been described by Guha (1991, pp. 221) as semi-tribal and semi-feudal in the pre-colonial period. The British conquest of erstwhile Assam led to few changes in the agrarian landscape. Unlike many other regions, it retained some of the elements of the tribal economy in the nineteenth century. The government also encouraged state ownership



of land, but *paik* services<sup>4</sup>, however, were discontinued and the system of tax collection through mouzadars was introduced. Later on, the tax system was to be replaced by the revenue system, under the ryotwari system. In this system, the government retained the right to property and it leased out lands to the tenants who paid revenue regularly, failing which the lands were confiscated by the state. There was another section of the officials who wanted to introduce the Bengali zamindari system to maintain the feudal order, which was retained in the Goalpara district of Assam. Adhiar (sharecroppers) and landless tenants, not unlike the rest of India, were prone to exorbitant rates and unreasonable and unfair measures of rent extraction under the above system of revenue, resulting in numerous conflicts and revolts. For the purpose of the study, few important incidents would be highlighted to throw light on the mobilization of the peasantry in Assam, against the landlord/zamindars or the nationalist character in the form of anti-colonial mobilization.

In the context of Assam, *raij mels* have hitherto played an almost time honoured role in the socio-political life of the masses. *Ryot sabhas* are also important organizations, much akin to the kisan sabhas in northern India, which were formed in the Brahmaputra valley in the pre-independence period. The intervention of the British in the economic and political life of the natives created rife among them, and this materialized in the form of peasant revolts in the valley in connections with the enhancement of land revenue in Nagaon, Mangaldoi, Lasima and Nagaon. Scholars argue that the *Raij Mels* (assembly of people) were militant organizations which have historically led peasant based mobilizations and collectively ordained the political and collective lives of the villagers, comprising of both tribal and non-tribal populations.

One of the earliest uprisings had taken place in Phulaguari, in Assam. The British administration always acted in the interests of the British tea planters, not the common masses<sup>5</sup>. These tea planters had a dearth of labourers and had to bring labourers from other states at high costs. So the tea planters thought that it would be better to engage the local people as labourers in their estates, but the indigenous population did not seek employment in the tea estates as the land in

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<sup>4</sup> The *paik* system was a system of corvee labour whereby every able-bodied individual within ages 16-60 (approximately) had to render compulsory services to the state. The duty of a *paik* was to render service to the Ahom state in exchange for which he was granted 2 *puras* (2.66 acres) of cultivable land (*gaa mati*). This land was neither hereditary nor transferable.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.drсанjib.net/2016/08/07/phulaguri-uprising-the-first-peasant-movement-in-the-indian-freedom-movement/>

the Brahmaputra valley was very fertile. In a well-planned scheme, taxes began to be levied on the right to fish in beels (lakes) and rivers, for cutting timber, reeds and for grazing cattle among other things in order to pauperize the population and hence coerce them to take employment in the estates. In 1860, income tax was introduced in India and in the following year extended to Assam. The cultivation of poppy was banned; poppy's juice was used to produce opium, and this indigenous system adversely affected the government's revenue; moreover, they wanted to conduct trading in opium themselves. Soon after there was a widespread apprehension that taxes would be levied upon the ryots' houses and homesteads, also on paan (betel leaf) cultivation which is central to consuming habits of the Assamese. Village elders and leading ryots made several representations to the colonial administration, but received no assurance in return. Instead, the protesters were detained and fined. The villagers collectively resolved not to pay the taxes as a measure to pressurize the government. A meeting of the people or *raj mel* was proposed to be convened at Phulaguri which alarmed the district administration. An effort to forcibly disperse the ryots resulted in the killing of an official

A large number of ryots were imprisoned and what is referred to as uprising was crushed. The Phulaguri affair was not merely a revolt whose vanguard were the indigenous tribals alone, it was also supported by the educated and well-to-do middle classes consisting of small land owners, government servants, mouzadars, traders and merchants who were no less affected by recent taxes on income, trades and dealings (Barpujary and Bhuyan, 1978).

The battle of Patharughat in Darrang district is another significant chapter in the book of peasant uprisings in Assam. It is also known as the Jallianwala Bagh of Assam. In 1868, seven years after the Phulaguri incident, several thousands of masses gathered at the Tahsildar's office at Patharughat to express their grievances against the increase of land tax<sup>6</sup>. The angry mob set fire to a bungalow, but the leaders succeeded in pacifying the crowd and in securing twenty-five free years of incident. On 28<sup>th</sup> January, 1894, however, the government tried to increase the tax once again and this was met with stiff resistance from the peasants who flocked in hundreds to the Dak Bungalow (government building under the British Raj) to meet the Police Superintendent, but the officials refused to decrease the revenue. Soon the peasants began to protest and a fight ensued, leaving the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang with no choice but to leave orders for

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<sup>6</sup> <http://patharughat.blogspot.in/>

mass firing, and resulting in the death of about 140 peasants and several others injured. Braving the fear of death, the peasants continued to attack the forces with whatever they could get their hands on. But a large number of people had already fallen to the latter's bullets, and the crowd got dispersed. It was reported that the dead bodies of the killed were left behind by the British to be devoured by scavengers. This massacre is another striking example of the martyrdom that peasants sustained in the struggle against the oppressive British regime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, much before the Jallianwala Bagh in Punjab in 1919, probably one of the few first peasant resistances in the country.

Both the Phulaguri incident and the battle of Patharughat were peasant revolts but without the lack of proper leadership, which is why they resulted in failure. Both were nationalist in character for they sought to fight the oppressive measures initiated during the British Raj. While Mridula Mukherjee responds to the academic foregrounding of the peasants as passively being subsumed in the nationalist movement with a high dose of scepticism, her articulations on the same as active agents of the non-violent anti-imperialist regime cannot be assigned to the aforesaid peasant movements. Leadership in any form was collective, manifested by the presence of *raij mels* which formed the collective base of mobilization and decision making. A single unifying idea which gives peasant insurgency its fundamental social character is the notion of 'community' (Chatterjee, 1988) where individual identities are themselves from membership in a community. The notion of community, the boundaries or forms of solidarity in peasant rebellions have no single determinate character which can be directly deduced wither from its immediate socio-economic context or its cultural context (ibid.). The argument hence about the limitation of peasants based on ties of caste, ethnic and religious considerations fall flat when one observes how the same ties of community become resourceful in the long run.

The above proposition also holds true in the context of one of the most violent post-colonial communal riots of Assam, the Nellie massacre of 1983. It was reported as a tribal mass movement all over India, but its latent peasant character should also be called into elaboration. Nellie as a small rural area in central Assam was witness to a large-scale violence and communal killing against the Muslim Bengalis as an aftermath of the state's legislative assembly's elections (Kimura, 2013, pp. 1). The Congress-led Government of India decided to hold the elections in Assam without revising the electoral rolls. The leaders of the Assam movement demanded that

the names of foreigners be deleted from the rolls, and when things did not proceed as demanded they gave a call for boycotting the elections. Nearly 2000 people were killed by the tribal peasants. The anti-foreigner movement that began in 1979 served as the ideological backdrop of the mobilization of the masses (ibid.). The indigenous tribes like the Bodos and Tiwas had lost most of their traditional lands to the immigrants, and this was highly broadcasted by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) sprinkling the seeds of popular dissent manifested in the form of violence against the “foreigners”.

Chandramohan’s article titled “Political Economy of Agrarian conflicts in India” (1998) recount how both the rich/middle and the poor peasants were affected by the revenue and commercial policy of the colonial government, certain common understanding brought them together in the struggle against the landlords. This hence brought about broad class divisions, i.e. ‘peasants’ versus ‘landlords’. The alliance between the landlords and the British managed to ensure that the conflicts were localized and subsequently subdue them. The author further notes the translation of ‘class’ divisions into ‘caste’ affiliations. The big landlords who participated in the political process and governance benefited and made the most out of new agrarian policies like green revolution, commercialization of agriculture, land reforms, demarcation of crop-specific regions and corresponding farm lobbies. The poor peasants gained very little with a very little marketable surplus and the amount of wages received were invested further in the purchasing of HYV of wheat and rice. Abject poverty and landlessness were manifested among certain sections of the population, i.e. the STs and the SCs among others. The middle peasants in the post independence period began to align themselves with the rich landlords unlike in the past when it was in strife with the latter. The widespread rural poverty coupled with unemployment and differential development, are the factors which since 1947 have contributed to militant/extremist peasant struggles (Pp. 2647-2653).

The anti-landlord peasant movements of the mid-twentieth century Assam involve narratives of rural unrest. The crisis of the sharecroppers (adhiars) and landless peasants against Assamese landlordism manifested in a symbolic protest which was brought out through street demonstrations in Guwahati on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947. They refused to pay nothing more than one-fourth of their produce to the landlords. Over the next couple of years, there were incidents of resisting evictions and violent clashes in the countryside of the state. By the twentieth century,

sharecropping became the most dominant feature of the peasant economy in Assam due to exorbitant exactions in the form of rent and other customary services, absentee landlordism, grip over cultivation and marketing of produce by moneylenders, governmental promotion of jute cultivation by encouragement of immigration of East Bengali peasants, spread of small peasant holdings and landlessness (Chakrabarti, 2015). Saikia (2014) highlights petitions as the first form of legitimate way of addressing peasants' grievances. Petitions offer glimpses of the complex changes taking place in agrarian practices, due to the displacement of traditional uses of lands, water-bodies, forests and pastures, caused by colonial projects of 'improvement' (op. cit.). In the years preceding independence, the peasants responded to the nationalist mobilization under the ryot sabhas, putting up their demands of reduction in revenue rates.

During this period, the peasant leaders also formed alliances with communist peasant organizations. Saikia notes that the communist mobilization of peasants in the countryside in the 1940s was clearly in the hands of two ideologically divided communist parties- the Revolutionary Communist Parties of India (RCPI) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) (2014, pp. 03). The RCPI adopted two slogans- *tin bhag* (one third share), and *nagal jaar maati taar* (land belongs to one who tills it) gaining popularity among the sharecroppers and landless peasants (ibid.). It is imperative to stress that peasant mobilization in the early and mid-twentieth century saw the rise of several sharecroppers and landless tenants in revolt against the oppressive sections of the agrarian society, and in many cases, without any help from the communist leaders. It would be futile to believe that the anti-colonial movement and the anti-landlord movement just like the anti-eviction mobilization under study is a product of outside forces; such examples solely reinforce the idea that the peasantry is capable of constituting subjects for their own history.

In Malabar and Kasargod in Kerala in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, armed rebellion against the imperialist power and feudal forces was also spearheaded by the peasantry. These peasants took part in the Khilafat and the Non-Cooperation movement in 1921 in which the Mapilla peasants played an important role (1988). The nature of the revolt was violent, which was why the Indian National Congress disowned this movement. In 1936, the All Indian Kisan Sabha and subsequently the All Malabar Karshaka Sangham were formed out of different classes of peasantry organized together on a united basis to fight for freedom for complete economic exploitation, i.e. to stop all

illegal collections and feudal levies realized by the landlords from the peasants. Kurup notes that during the early phase the struggles were influenced by the philosophy of non-violence, the ideology of the national movement, although the class organization of the peasantry had been based on the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Further, it was a united movement consisting of all sections of the peasantry and that was reflected in the character of the All-Indian Kisan Sabha” (Kurup, 1988, pp. 43).

Kurup further recounts how in the pre-independence period the constituents of the peasant revolts encompassed class divisions and was based on the policy of militant agitations, demonstrations and protests and the ideology of the national movement, but in 1946 and 1948 the Communist parties led the small peasantry and the landless agricultural labourers in an ideological battle against the remains of imperialist rule and feudal order, like the detection and distribution of surplus food grains among the needy, cultivation of wasteland monopolized by the local landlords and the government, struggles against the caste system and authorization of temple entry for the lower caste members and so on (ibid. pp. 42). Thus the tactics adopted to protest against injustice meted out were non-violent in nature. In Assam, the militant form manifested under the *Raij Mels* slowly began to give way to non-violent “constitutional path agitation based on ideas of liberal democracy” (Saikia, 2013, pp. 32-33). The *Ryot Sabhas* hence began to be popular among the masses, especially in the Brahmaputra Valley and became active in the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement seeking political emancipation. Saikia’s study on the Ryot Sabha (ibid.) in Assam led him to conclude that the middle peasants played the most progressive role in the nationalist movement between the period 1900-1947 by taking the character of peaceful constitutional agitations like no tax, no rent, social boycott, unlike the Phulaguri and the Patharughat incidents which turned violent.

The link between peasants and the national movement becomes evidently explicit when one observes that the vast majority of political activists who joined the Communist party and were active in the Kisan Sabhas in the 1930s and 1940s emerged out of one or the other stream of the anti-imperialist movement and also were the leaders of the peasant movement and the national movement (Mukherjee, 2004, pp. 338). Saikia (op. cit., pp. 166-167) further argues that the ryots in Sibsagar district in Assam were the most prone to the nationalist call for independence. Here, the students mobilized the agrarian masses in the Non-Cooperation Movement. It is important to

note here that, under the rural population tea garden labourers also form a chunk of it; similarly tribal communities engaged in the cultivation of land and other allied activities also come under the Assamese peasant population of the Brahmaputra Valley.

Karna in his book (1989) addresses few generalizations offered by the administrators and social scientists on the agrarian conflicts and tensions in the post-independence period, which is pertinent to the above-mentioned examples of peasant protests. Firstly, the discrepancy between the egalitarian social norms and conservative distribution norms upheld by the poorer and the dominant sections of the society respectively is the primary cause of agrarian unrest. Ideological and class dimensions hence play a significant role in this context. However, subjective perceptions of injustice, poverty and exploitation instead of objective conditions of existence as suggested above can also be factors of conflict; moreover, he quotes Alexander's study in Alleppey district in Kerala which shows that politicization leads to conflict between labourers and farmers, both of which constitute the poorer sections of the society. The second generalization attempts to root agrarian tension to the socio-economic consequences of land reforms. Land reforms have been undertaken by the government since independence, known as reforms from 'above' they have been the vehicle of party campaigning. Reform movements from 'below' sometimes constitute the militant agitations like the Telangana and the Naxalite movements, and non-violent assertions like the Bhoodan and Gramdan movements. But land reforms tend to benefit the big farmers and the small tenant-farmers rather than the landless labourer or the sharecropper. Quoting the off-quoted report of the Ministry of Home Affairs 1969, the author discerns how the land reform measures have not only failed but also enhanced the old agrarian inequalities. Thirdly, in the wake of the Green revolution, poor peasants, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers have not been able to share profitably in the general prosperity.

Land reforms, the increasing polarization between the rich landlords and the poor sharecroppers, the insensitivity of the state towards the occupants of the temporary villages are some of the factors that have led to the assertion of nationalism in the area under study. These would constitute the subject of discussion in the subsequent chapter. Peasant nationalism from the border between Assam and Nagaland reflect the larger concern for identifying with the Asamiya nationalism that resulted from the Assam Movement in the twentieth century and manifests itself

in the relationship between the 'self' and the 'other'. It is worth mentioning that the category of 'self' is subjected to demands arising out of particular contexts; at the time of the anti-foreigner movement the category of 'other' shifted from the cultural category "Bengali Hindus" (who had under the colonial government occupied various important official positions) to the political category "foreigners" (Kimura, 2013, pp. 50). The Naxalite forces tried to build a support base among the nationalist peasant agencies of the forest villages but were unsuccessful. They wrongly identified the rich landlords as the enemies of the poor peasants. An elaborate discussion on politics of border along with the insensitive attitude of the state policies that bring out the nationalist tendencies among the poor peasants which have gone unnoticed over the years will be made in the third chapter.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Forest Dwellers, Peasant Mobilization and Border Politics**

Nationalism is about 'land', both in terms of possession and (literal) rebuilding, and of belonging where forefathers lived and where history demarcates a 'homeland'. Subjectively, therefore, locating the nation hinges on a reading of ethnic history, which presupposes links between the generations of a community of history and destiny in particular places of the earth (Smith, 1991:70).

Studies on reserved forests by and largely revolve around issues of ecology, livelihood and land rights. Sociological literature on these aforesaid themes engages in the nexus between livelihood issues with forest conservation, under the broad subject matter of social movements. The rubric of nationalism from forest dwellers provoked by the strategic location of forest villages is perhaps a grey area that needs further exploration. This study aims to understand this terrain of nationalism that coincides with the right to land and security of life. For the purpose of locating the nationalist movement in Assam, it is important to delve into the broader struggles that the participants face in the face of eviction by the state and the ruckus of disputed areas. Contradictions on the one hand between the interests of the rich, middle and the poor peasantry, and on the other between forest cultivation and conservation are deep rooted in the state. This chapter would enquire into the different waves of migration into the forested areas of Doyang and Tengani (Nambhor), and their subsequent impact on the socio-cultural demography on the same. This chapter attempts to locate a mobilization 'from below' by indigenous inhabitants and seek to show the economic and political negotiations that revolve around forest villages in Assam.

#### **4.1 A Brief History of Doyang and Tengani Movements in Assam**

Doyang and Tengoni are two villages located in Golaghat and the Nambhor reserved forest area of Jorhat district in Upper Assam respectively. The Doyang forests were formed on 30<sup>th</sup> of July, 1886 as per Bengal Forest Act. The total area of Doyang is approximately 24636 hectares. According to G. K. Pillai Report prepared in 1997, 23000 hectares are occupied by *Assamese* people and 1000 hectares are by the *Nagas* (cited in Borah, 34). It shares its boundaries with

Nagaland on its south, the Kakodunga river to its east and the Doyang river to its west (ibid.). To the west of Doyang river are the Rengama and Nambhor Forests (ibid.).

In 1905 in order to tackle with a shortage of labourers within forests, four forest villages were formed in Doyang Reserved Forest adjacent to Nambhor by settling peasant families. Residence inside the forests was the primary requirement of the forest department, with a provision made for annual *patta*. Since then hence these forest villages came to be known as temporary villages, serving instrumental ends for the colonial rulers. In this manner, a gradual process of peasantization occurred in the Brahmaputra valley. There was no clear regulation as to the limitation of land holdings under one peasant, some of them began to accumulate more lands for cultivation and became rich. This accounts for the economic differentiation among the peasantry that one finds in the said forests today.

The Nambhor reserve forest served as a frontier land for the Ahom and Kachari kingdoms. Human settlement was scarce as it laid alongside the Naga hill tracts; even though the Ahoms encouraged settlement in these forests, local skirmishes between both the kingdoms led to partial habitation even though the land was fertile for wet rice cultivation. In fact, during the Ahom rule, the kingdom retained the right over the forest cover while the population had their privilege over the produce and forest resources. In the early part of the nineteenth century when the East India Company began to lead expeditions into these forested lands, they found next to no human settlement but a rich growth of timber. Very soon, peasants were encouraged to settle in these areas. The population of Assam engaged in shifting and opium cultivation, the requirement for which needed the slashing and cutting down of trees. By the mid nineteenth century, the Company began to experience a shortage of fuel and timber, also because of the fact that the tea planters needed the wood to prepare boxes and for firewood. It was thus decided that the Nambhor forests would be converted to 'reserved' forests so that the Company could retain its hold on how much and when timber was to be extracted. In 1891, the Assam Forest Regulation Act made an attempt to resolve the dilemma of agricultural expansion and peasant cultivation by introducing the term un-classed state forests, under which waterlogged areas, old roads, embankments, and other un-cultivable lands were categorized, in order to expand the agrarian frontier into the forests. These lands were opened for peasant cultivation, without any however right to be given to them to settle permanently, under the mauzadari system of revenue

collection. The region began to be popularly known as *Tengani* in the post independence period when seven *taungya* villages were added to it. Tengani in *Aitoni* (a tribe of Assam of Thai origin) means “*Tee*” implying high and “*Gunana*” meaning meadows; hence literally it means high meadow. People also claim that the name Tengani is derived from the abundant availability of “*Jora-tenga*” (a kind of citrus fruit) and *Ou-tenga* (Elephant Apple).

Total population in Doyang today is around 1.20 lakhs distributed in 111 villages, while Tengani has 42 villages with more than 50 thousand populations. The colonial government saw to the fact that these and all the adjoining forests, as mentioned, were declared as ‘reserved forests’ in 1859 with a view to preserving the rich growth of timber in these forests. Some areas were however available for cultivation which is why the government encouraged landless Assamese peasants to take up cultivation in these forested lands; this also solved the problem of labour supply for the colonizers. The ethnic composition of these areas was highly diverse-Bodo, Muslim, Mising, Adivasi, Nepali and many other indigenous communities of Assam. According to Arupjyoti Saikia, three different phases of immigration were visible in these forested areas, the first being the above mentioned colonial scheme. As part of its colonization programme, the colonial state since the early twentieth century had begun to settle East Bengal peasants for jute cultivation (Saikia, 2008a, pp. 97).

The second phase was during the 1950s when the region saw immense left-led movements that resulted in the occupation of forest lands by landless peasants; the government led by Congress back then had no other option than to extend support to this form of land reclamation for the peasantry. The third phase was in the 1970s and 80s when a large number of landless peasants arrived without the encouragement from either the government or authorities. However, ‘*taungya*’ or forest villages were established in Tengani during this time to meet labour demands by the forest department. These batches of immigrants included those who had lost their land or property with flood or erosion, or due to heavy debt owed to moneylenders; tea garden labourers whose contract for working on the tea gardens had expired or ended; and those poor peasants from East Bengal (till then a part of the Indian colonial state, and a region with which the colonial province of Assam shared a common boundary) who had under the British government

settled in scarcely populated areas to work as settled cultivators<sup>7</sup> but with competition and shortage of land found themselves migrating to upper Assam. Akhil Dutta notes that under the forest village system the inhabitants were to work in the reserve for a couple of days in a month in return for which they were given a plot of land and the wetlands for cultivation. Apart from the forest village system, Britishers also developed the system of *Tongya* people, were allowed to settle in one place only for three years without any cultivation right. Their means of livelihood was basically daily wage (2009, unpublished).

In 1978, the then chief minister of Assam Golap Borbora decided to un-reserve the Doyang area to facilitate the increasing number of peasants to get settlement rights. While the question of *patta* was toyed around with for some time, no permanent solution was offered. Since then the Government introduced all public facilities like electricity, ration shops, schools, hospitals etc in Doyang; The area also availed benefits under local area development funds of Member of Parliament and Member of the Legislative Assembly (ibid.). The border dispute and clash between Assam and Nagaland in Merapani led to the virtual collapse of the human entitlement process in Doyang (ibid.). In the meantime, the Forest (Regulation) Act of 1980 was passed which made the process of un-reservation of forests for the purpose of non-forest activity like getting settlement rights null and void unless taken permission from the Central Government. Simultaneously, the inter-border conflict between Assam and Nagaland on the Doyang Reserve Forest led to the control of the disputed areas under the Central Reserved Police Force. All of these led to the alienation of the resident-inhabitants of Doyang from their source of livelihood, from their huts and also from their site of settlement.

Tengani was first introduced as a Revenue village by the British in 1835-38, and subsequently brought under the Nambhor Reserved Forest in 1878. It soon became a *taungya* village, with the Tai communities being brought in to take care of the forest without however any right to permanent settlement and right to livelihood. Since the 1960s, there have been periodic evictions carried out by the state government with the claim that the villages have been over populated, mostly by those who had been displaced from Majuli due to flood and erosion. However this

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<sup>7</sup> Peasants in erstwhile Assam were reluctant on engaging in wage labour which is why the British brought peasants from East Pakistan, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand to work on cash crops and tea gardens.

attempt to drive out encroachers permanently has failed since the inhabitants claim that they have lived there since 1950 and this is evident from the official papers.

“First April, in 1987, the office of the Deputy Commissioner of the then undivided Sibsagar District issued a letter No JRS 34/85/51 to the Range Forest Officer, Social Forestation, Golaghat where it was mentioned that in the Tengani Sadhugaon of Borpathar Mouja 100 families had been given settlement in the forestland for last twenty years. Therefore, the Deputy Commissioner’s office requested to let the office know ‘could these forestland be unreserved’ to provide permanent settlement to those people in that forestland” (Dutta, unpublished)

Further, the Tengani Gaon Panchayat was established in 1993 with 7500 voters. There are five government Lower Primary schools and two Middle schools, and since 1985, the area has also been receiving the scheme benefits of the Development Block and other government benefits. Under the schemes of rural development of the central government, roads, pucca houses and drinking water facilities have been provided. Electrification and telephone connections have also been provided. Tengani is receiving assistance from World Bank too. In the year 2002-03 Rs. 5 lakh was allotted from the Rural Development Department. The civil rights activists in Assam claim that ecologists along with the Forest Department of Assam have made numerous attempts at evicting these people in the name of ecological conservation. The Forest Department under the Government of Assam since 2002 have made numerous attempts at evicting these desolate victims.

On February 18, 2002, the Supreme Court directed the Chief Secretaries of Orissa, West Bengal, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Kerala to submit to it a list of measures taken by them to prevent further encroachment of forest land, particularly in the hilly terrain and in national parks and sanctuaries<sup>8</sup>. It was this directive that prompted the State Forest Department to intensify its drive against encroachers. In order to put up their resistance to this inhumane act, the peasants of Tengani formed the Brihattar Unnayan Sangram Samity (BTUSS) on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2002 and also demanded permanent *patta* of land. It also demanded halting the process of dispossession (Saikia, 2008, pp. 47). In 2002, it organized a demonstration in Golaghat which was attended by some 20,000 victims (ibid.). As a result of this, it was agreed upon by the deputy commissioner of Golaghat district that any further eviction would be done only with prior information relayed to BTUSS. It was also decided that in

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<sup>8</sup> A controversial eviction drive. Frontline, August 02, 2002.

addition to the above-mentioned demands, compensation was to be provided to the victim families and the process of afforestation to be stopped. Gradually BTUSS began to carve out a socio-political space for itself as a representative of the landless through the settling of village disputes, exposing corruption scams and conducting numerous public meetings and demonstrations. In the course of the struggle, the land occupied by rich landowners had also been occupied and redistributed among the poor influenced by the Bhoodan Movement (ibid, 48). As per the new constitution adopted by the organization in November, 2004, it turned its attention to two main issues: illegal trade of timber, and conservation raised by environmental lobbyists (ibid.). It suggested a conservation programme whereby every peasant family receive a minimum of ten bighas of land from the forest department for cultivation and a maximum of thirteen hectares. The Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti hence gained widespread support from hapless peasants who for the first time began to be organized under one common banner for common purposes. It was successful in executing the suspension of eviction and rejecting the rehabilitation under Joint Forest Management (JFM) which was proposed to be given to the peasants, however not to be mistaken for *patta*. This was but rejected by the BTUSS on the ground that such an act would nowhere assure one of tenurial rights over the land.

The Doyang Mukti Sangram Samiti (DMSS) was also formed in 2004 along very similar lines, however sparked off due to border situation. The main thrust of the movement came from the fact that “rural livelihood in the uncertain political milieu of border villages necessitated permanent land rights” (ibid.). Both the BTUSS and DMSS display their nationalist character from time and again by refusing membership to the “illegal” immigrants who live and work in the forests, and appealing to the Chief Minister of Assam in 2005 to not concede to the demands of greater Nagalim (ibid, pp. 50). On 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2005, the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) was formed in Tezpur under the patronage of both BTUSS and DMSS which sought to expand their support base (Sharma, 2013, pp. 13). It delved into a myriad of issues- from compensation to be given to those owners whose land had been drilled for oil and coal, conservation of forest and ecology to corruption issues. It also opposes the construction of hydro power projects in Arunachal Pradesh which would fall heavy on the peasants’ livelihood and lives downstream. So within a short span of time, the objectives of KMSS broadened from giving tenurial land rights (*patta*) for the people living in the forest lands to larger issues that not only impinges on peoples’ livelihood but also the environment and ecology of Assam and other

states (Sharma, 2013). Its opposition to developmental projects undertaken by the state in coalition with corporate sector is part of its movement against the 'neo-colonial exploitation' of the region (Gogoi, 2010). The main thrust of the movement, Sharma argues, is the decentralization of the power of governance. Politico- economic power, the organization contends, should be entrusted with the community.

In terms of ideology, the leaders of KMSS believe in scientific socialism, or 'people's ideology'. The movement is hence enriched with Marxist ideological position that is combined with nationalism. The different agendas that the organization takes up differ from mass anti-dam rallies, foot march and other demonstrations to the effective use of the Right to Information Act to bring to book corrupt practices in the implementation of pro-poor schemes like MNREGS, IAY, PDS, and etc. for instance, on 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2010, KMSS organised a massive rally to protest against the dam construction in Arunachal Pradesh in Guwahati which was also attended by renowned social activist Medha Patkar, along with other eminent regional individuals. In July 2007, it also organised a conference in Gauhati University. Initially, the movement's protests were concentrated only in upper Assam but of late the activists have taken to the streets of Guwahati to make their demands heard in greater horizons.

The leadership of the organisation is provided by small and marginal peasants, local villagers and youths. Young graduates have also taken to joining and leading the movement to demand *patta* with an absence of no alternative form of livelihood since they cannot mortgage their lands for obtaining bank loans in order to set up entrepreneurial activities (Saikia, 2007, pp. 9). It is, however, Akhil Gogoi who was the primary leader aka general secretary of the organisation. There are also women leaders who articulate their demands, which also include ill treatment by their husbands. The organisation has been credited with unifying a large section of otherwise divided communities, like the tribes Bodos, Kacharis, Misings, Adivasis, and Nepalis. In a conflict prone area like Assam, this is indeed a very commendable endeavour; what is important is the issue of land which has served as a common bond tying factor. However, since the last few years, the leaders of the organization has been accused of lobbying and indulging in beneath-the-counter transactions. Moreover, it lost its original support after land rights began to occupy a subservient position in their agendas, thus de-legitimizing its claim as a peasant organization. It

faced stiff resistance from the peasants primarily from Tengani who saw forest lands as cultivable lands, in contrast to other NGOs who saw forests to be reserved (op. cit, pp. 52).

## **4.2 Cartographic Dimension**

Control of space, or rather the practice of territoriality, is at the core of the modern state. Territoriality is nothing but a strategy of the state to control resources and people by controlling area. This becomes problematic at the boundaries of that territory beyond which lies and is challenged by the neighbouring state's territoriality. In the period preceding the rise of the modern nation-state, the spaces between two kingdoms were not tangible boundaries; they were mostly hills, rivers or seas and hence populations could easily move from one kingdom to another as and when deemed appropriate. Ethnic ties in Northeast India, as discussed in the first chapter, do not neatly coincide with state boundaries, especially given the nature of boundaries between the states shaped by the political logic of what Sanjib Baruah describes as a cosmetic federal order. This hence explains the existence and the pressing demands by the ethnic groups of separate homelands and protection against immigration by outsiders.

David Gellner (2014, pp. 7) writes that India during its independence inherited a colonial and premodern set of borders along its northwestern, northern and northeastern frontiers. They are 'pre-modern' in the sense that in practice- whatever the spurious precision of the lines drawn or claimed in treaties or maps- they are fuzzy and contested, and also because in many places along the borders the local population have strong ties across them and often carry on daily life in disregard or even in ignorance of them. He further contends in pre-modern polities (state) - land was abundant and people in scare supply; power radiated out from the centre and hence ruler's command was authoritative, and boundaries were fluid and messy. The consequence for border areas before the rise of the modern state is that they simultaneously have multiple allegiances or none.



### 4.3 Implications of the Demand for Greater Nagalim

The Naga nationalist struggle for independence is perhaps the longest nationality movement by any group in India. The Naga National Council (NNC) the political wing of the (underground) Naga Federal Government claim that the Nagas had never been subjugated throughout the ages, until briefly by the British imperialists. 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, 2014, pp. 194).

The constitutional border outlined by the government in 1963 when the hill state was created is the site of contestation for both Assam and Nagaland. The Nagas claim that districts like Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong belong to them; these districts fall in the 512.1-kilometer long border between both the states. Assam claims that the Nagas have encroached upon 66,000 hectares of its land in the aforesaid districts<sup>9</sup>. It is of crucial importance for the purpose of the study to note that the encroached areas constitute about 80% of the reserved forests in Assam. The residents of these districts are no strangers to tales and incidents of violence. To maintain law and order, the central government forces such as CRPF have been employed in the region since 1971 (ibid.). Since 1972 both Assam and Nagaland have signed four interim agreements to maintain status quo. A village called Merapani in the Doyang Reserve Forest in Golaghat district witnessed the first and the severest of clashes in the border areas in 1985. The India Today reported-

“In a series of clashes that began on the evening of June 4, just when the respective commissioners of the two states were discussing steps to defuse tension along the border, the entire Merapani Bazar was reduced to debris, the Assam police station destroyed, over 27,000 villagers rendered destitute in the conglomeration of settlements around Merapani and - even on conservative estimates - at least 40 people, 30 of them police men were left dead and over a hundred wounded” (June 30, 1985).

Both the state governments engaged in blame game on the other. While the Assamese authorities claim that the violence was totally unprovoked by the Nagas, the latter claim that the Assam Forest Department decided to construct a check post a little ahead of the Merapani Police Station near the area inhabited by the Lotha Nagas, thereby infuriating the Naga authorities and the communities for not abiding by the status quo of the interim agreement on disputed areas.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.timesofassam.com/headlines/the-hidden-war-at-assam-nagaland-border-india-against-itself/>

Another incident in Golaghat in 1979 led to the torching of villages constituting communities including the Adivasi tea tribes and the Tai Ahom communities, who have fled their homes since these violent episodes and have resided in refugee camps. On January 5, 1979, 54 Assam villagers were killed in a series of attacks by armed men from Nagaland in Chungajan, Uriamghat and Mikirbheta of Golaghat district, while over 23,500 persons fled to relief camps<sup>10</sup>. Ever since its inception in 1963, the militant organizations of Nagaland, especially the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) have time and again led claims on areas lying in Assam, Meghalaya, Myanmar and Manipur.

#### **4.4 Between Assamese and Asamiya**

For the purpose of the study, we must look at the contemporary distinction between who is an 'Assamese' as against an 'Asamiya', the roots of which can be traced to the Assam Movement. The Assam movement (1979-85) had its roots in major socio-economic, demographic and political changes and correlations of class forces in Assam during the colonial as well as the post colonial period (Hussain, 1993, pp. 16). Saikia claims that the political history of Assam took a new turn after 1960, which was the period of Assamese nationalist mobilization centred on questions of language, infiltration from East Pakistan and severe food crisis in the mid-1960s (2014, pp. 303). It involves the nationality question more than merely the question of foreign nationals in Assam. By the nationality question, Hussain refers to the totality of political, ideological, cultural, territorial, economic and legal relations on the one hand with the Indian state, and other nations or nationalities on the other.

By Asamiya nationality, we mean the historically evolved and distinct community of people commonly speaking Asamiya language, having a composite Asamiya culture, certain specific commonness in psychological makeup, living in a common geographic area and economic zone- the Brahmaputra Valley. This Asamiya nationality is a multi-caste, multi-racial, multi-racial and multi-class community. As a nationality, the Asamiyas include non-caste Hindus like the Ahoms, Koch-Rajbongshis, Morans, Motaks, Chutiyas, Deuris, Kocharis, Muslims comprising of Syeds, Shaikhs, Morias and Julahas; caste hindu Asamiyas like the Brahmins, Gonaks, Kayasthas and Kalitas, among other lower placed castes. In addition, the black-tribals of Assam's tea plantation and Na-

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.financialexpress.com/archive/assam-vs-nagaland-a-border-dispute-of-five-decades/1281413/>

Asamiya Muslims are two other major groups that entered the Asamiya nationality during the first half of the present century (ibid, pp. 21-22).

Dutta (2012) similarly argues that while the Assam Movement is best known for its primary and most frequently stated aim, the expulsion of illegal foreign nationals, it began with a plan of action that looked at comprehensive economic development for Assam through land reform measures, industrialization, nationalization of private industries, stopping of eviction of poor peasants from the reserved forest areas of Doyang, Kaki and Mingmon, the control of floods, and government intervention in the procurement and the distribution of food grains. It was, however, the emotive issue of cultural and racial identity, disseminated among the people through the All Assam Students Union that began to dominate the movement from the start.

Questions of caste and religion, scholars debate, began to emerge with the imposition of census data on the population of India by the British, who speculated that doing so would ensure administrative efficiency. Questions of identity and ethnicity also hence cropped up in the same manner. Eminent litterateur and journalist Kanaksen Deka declared that until the advent of the British there was nothing like the Assamese (cited in Dutta, 2012, pp. 193). Instead, there were Bodo, Dimasa, Karbi, Koch, Ahom, Tiwa, Mising, Sonowal, Moran, Motak, Sutiya, Ramun, Sudir, Kayastha, Kalita, etc. The British began to refer to the term 'Aham' (for the Ahom kingdom) to Assam. Simultaneously, the standardization process ensured that the Sibsagar dialect began to be recognized as the Assamese language over other dialects like Kamrupi, Goalporia and Darangi (ibid.). This was also possible due to the efforts of the Baptist Missionaries who in the nineteenth century assisted the Assamese nationalists to promote the native language over the domination of Bengali as a medium of instruction (ibid.). Other scholars look at the proselytizing efforts of Neo-Vaishnavite saint Shankardev, who brought together under a single fold the likes of many who were otherwise considered to be lower castes and tribes, as a composite study of the Assamese identity. Unity in devotion to a particular deity makes the differences in caste and religion redundant under commonality of worship. Dutta further notes that the functioning of traditional institutions like the system of boys' dormitory by the Tiwas in Assam has been reinforced in contemporary period in an attempt to counter the assimilation process at work.

The notable feature of the Assam Movement is its comprehensiveness; political, economic and cultural aspects of the identity crisis were successfully integrated and articulated during the movement against the foreigners (Dutta, 2012, pp. 50). The movement, Dutta notes, lacked the concerted philosophical and historical consciousness, lacked an intellectual framework that could have enabled its leaders and participants to turn the gaze back inwards and to see the movement and its goals as having far-reaching effects beyond the immediate concerns with the illegal migrant. She interrogates the subvert forms of violence, manifested through indifference, neglect of the other, a desire to control and order the other (ibid.) that was not too obvious in the entire movement. The response of the host society to the migrants reflects the re-articulation of the identity formation that speaks only to the dominant Assamese. The constituents of the narrative and the rhetoric in which it was couched effectively shut out non-Assamese Indians, Assamese Muslims, tea garden communities and the several tribes that who could claim to have lived in Assam from “time immemorial”. By delving into the subject of ‘cultural violence’ the author further reiterates how the assimilation process means that the language and the culture of the indigenous Assamese now have new custodians- a new way of being Assamese may not be welcome in a scenario where the old way is threatened and sought to be guarded, thereby providing legitimacy to structural violence.

Questions like ‘who is an Assamese?’ requires primarily the demarcation and establishment of identity among all those who live in the territory of Assam (ibid, pp. 173).

“In imagining the concept of a modern Assamese identity, the term “Assamese” is contested and deeply troubling because, as with inclusive terminologies, it privileges one section of a people at the cost of others; the term renders the others invisible. A society that is made up of so many different groups and communities, all with distinct languages and cultures, is bound to have as its major problem this subsumption under a unitary term. The compulsions of nationalism cannot accommodate these many elements unless it releases itself from the majoritarian thesis” (op. cit., pp. 182).

The Asamiya culture was anchored in the language, while religion or ethnicity played a peripheral or secondary role. As evident from the above discussion, there is Assamese versus ‘Axomiya’ or Asamiya. ‘Assamese’ is quite a flexible term that accommodates differences rather than makes boundaries of separation; includes all those inhabitants who have their domicile in Assam (op. cit., pp. 16). ‘Axomiya’ or Asamiya, on the other hand, connotes ethnic identification; it refers to those who have Asamiya language as their mother tongue which hence

includes the neo-Asamiyas such as Na-Asamiya Muslims, the autochthon tribals and the black-tribals like the Adivasi communities who have accepted the language. Some scholars also suggest that in addition to speaking the language, identifying oneself under the Hindu social order also prescribes belonging to the greater Asamiya imagination, thus explaining the contempt held for the Muslim Bengalis. The genesis of the Assam Movement reflects today the “distinction between old migrant and illegal immigrant, whose economic and political acceptance is now sought to be supplemented by a cultural unification with the host society that is based on statements of loyalty, concern and commitment to this society’s vision of itself” (Dutta, 2012, pp. 242).

The Assamese peasantry was absorbed into the social base of the political movement. The scarcity of land began to be translated into a political slogan, with unrestricted migration forming the major cause of the same (Saikia, 2014, pp. 304). The 1960s saw a period of increasing peasant mobilization, particularly by the peasant wings of the communist parties with the central demand for tenurial rights for the sharecroppers or land for the landless peasantry (ibid., pp. 305). There was hence a widespread challenge to government administration when the peasants began to occupy lands from tea gardens and reserved forests and other government-owned lands. In August 1971, the Governor of Assam B. K. Nehru passed an ordinance that empowered the government to evict peasants from Reserved Forests, thus identifying all the inhabitants of these forest lands as encroachers. The Congress government in 1971 took it upon itself to amend the Assam Tenancy Act of 1935 which required occupancy rights to be given to the tenants who were cultivating a piece of land for twelve years. With the amendment, the occupancy period was now reduced to three years, along with the inclusion of the sharecroppers within the purview of this act. This Act infuriated the class of Assamese landlords, especially the absentee landlords who had from time and again leased out their lands out to the Bengali Muslim cultivators. Their skills as jute and multi-crop cultivator favoured the preference of the landlords towards them over the Assamese and tribal counterparts. By conceding occupancy rights to these immigrant tenants and sharecroppers the Assamese middle class or the landed gentry began to feel deprived and alienated and eventually they began to withdraw support to the Congress led government, and lent full support to the Assam Movement by 1979. Meanwhile, the Muslim sharecroppers who were nothing but poor peasants began to look for ways to get rid of their economic state. Empowered by the Tenancy Act they began to cultivate rice and vegetables, and fishery farms

which gained them profits. They also began to occupy *chars* or riverine areas which are known to be fertile, along with forest lands. This elaborate process of land accumulation and reclamation led the caste-Hindu Assamese peasants in a state of increasing landlessness, which explains their support to the aforesaid movement. The question of alienation from land and subsequently the problem of land scarcity in this manner paved the path for a nationalist consolidation of political identity, of which peasants formed an important base. This immigrant peasant slowly began to be a viable threat, transformed into an aggressive figure that holds on tenaciously into markers of identity, whose numbers relieve the pressure of integration into anonymity in the host society (Dutta, 2012, pp. 240). Myron Weiner (1978) notes that it is not inequalities between ethnic groups that generate conflicts, but competition whether perceived or real over control of or access to economic wealth, political power or social status.

Arupjyoti Saikia writes that from the 1960s, the landless peasants have occupied the centre stage of peasant politics (op. cite, pp. 331). Their demand revolved around land for the landless and thousands of these hapless peasants occupied government owned lands to meet the increasing agricultural demand for land. However, the landed gentry decided to repeal the Assam Tenancy Act in 1986, once again thus the peasants were ousted from their voices in the nationalist discourse in Assam in the name of ethnic mobilizations and the middle class roots of the movement. As for the tribal peasantry, they too joined the long quest of the Assamese landless peasantry for arable lands (ibid.).

#### **4.5 Self versus Others: Reflection of Assamese Nationalism from the Border**

It is the social boundary, which defines the group in question, not the cultural stuff which the boundaries contain (McCrone, 1998, pp. 28). Where social interaction is defined as taking place within or across these boundaries, then the group's identity will be maintained, reinforced or dissipated (ibid.). Interaction across boundaries may not necessarily result in the alteration of the two adjacent groups' cultural content, it may also lead to the growing of similar inhibitions. Sociologically, what is significant is not the strengthening or weakening of group identifiers, but the definition of one's social and cultural identity vis-à-vis others.

If we are trying to define ethnic or national identity, then what matters is what the boundaries are, especially people's self-descriptions of themselves vis-à-vis others. We cannot discuss ethnicity or nationality without focusing on the process of identification, on the active negotiation in which people take part as they construct who they are and who they want to be. While it is true that identities are constructed by participants in the course of social and political action, they are not entirely of their own making (ibid, pp. 29-30).

The Naga construction of self vis-à-vis Indians were essentially based on the principle of "othering". Their construction of identity hence is based on "differentiation". Similarly, the Assam Movement becomes a reference point, a marked protest from which identity narrative is emphatically reflective of the situation in contemporary times. The covert form of violence, strain, is evident in modes of behaviour, in relationships, in business practices and new value systems in the state (Dutta, 2012, pp. 61). In order to meet the demand for labour supply for jute cultivation, the colonial government also brought in poor and landless peasants from erstwhile East Bengal who were given settlements in 'wastelands'. This immigration slowly began to hamper the local peasants' access to the land resources (Sharma, 2013). Eminent scholar Hiren Gohain states, the independent Indian state carried on these colonial traditions and has spent little thoughts on the rights to life and livelihood that were practically if not legally guaranteed to them even by regimes known for abuse and oppression of the people (2006). Peasants left landless by the heavy erosion and flood, the changes in the courses of the Brahmaputra's tributaries and by eviction in the name of development and industrialization, can hardly expect that the government would somehow assume responsibility for their rehabilitation. Thousands of such displaced families had taken shelter in the forests on the border between the Golaghat district of Assam and Nagaland. Since the villages were temporary in nature, the peasants were never given tenural rights over the land. With increase in population through migration again, the state began to evict these peasants who were otherwise homeless. They began to protest under the leadership of CPI (ML) PCC and Peasant Association Assam.

Borders constitute socio-cultural or political state of flux (Baruah, 2012, pp. 07). Louis Wirth (1936, pp. 733) argues- A marginal people-i.e., a population in the frontier region between two states-even more than other peoples, has a mixed culture and a mixed racial makeup. The population of such territories not only is, as a rule, bilingual or poly lingual, but they are also

more decidedly nationalistic than the respective hinter- land populations with reference to which they are oriented. A marginal people is likely to cling to the traditions of its mother- land with the utmost tenacity, because the cultural heritage is, under conditions of foreign rule, sometimes the only remaining vestige of unity and brings the most divergent interests and parties into close co-operation. Hussain (op. cit) and Gohain argue that the Assamese nationality is a weak nationality; a nation in the making. Modern capitalist forces left the region untouched except with tea plantations which were when market forces began to percolate in the region (Gohain, 1985, pp. 24). The different ethnic groups owing allegiance to the overall Assamese way of life were not welded into a cohesive national strong group enough to withstand outside pressure. The nationality is materially and culturally backward in comparison to other national groups in India, and this explains why the Assamese are apprehensive with fears about not being in undisputed possession of the territory which they claim as their own (ibid.).

Nationalism is popularly believed by the modernist school to be modern phenomena, which emerged with the coming of the industrial society. The primordialists on the other hand maintain that nationalism is based on ties such as that of ethnic, religious among others. The peasantry as a category is also looked at from a primordial angle. Hardiman refers to the existence of two theories which help to maintain that the peasantry allied with the nationalist call for independence- religious and factional. Both these theories demonstrate how the peasants are taken in by some personality akin to 'religious' figure, and the factions that mobilize the peasants at the local level are also based on primordial ties like that of caste. It is hence assumed that the peasantry as a primordial category is lost in the whims of caste and kinship relations. The peasants under consideration borrow the concept of national identity from the mainstream Assamese nationalism, but its emergence is profoundly related to the emergence of the modern nation-state, and capitalism. Forests being cleared for development projects lead to eviction drive undertaken by the state making it a paucious exercise for the forest dwellers to engage in the anti-Nagalim assertion. This brings to mind the Ethno symbolist school which believe that nations are themselves modern phenomena, but pre-modern roots espoused by primordialism are also vital to understanding peoples' relationships to the nation.

Agitations, in the local-level are hardly divorced from the wider political context; therefore the politics of locality must be grappled with to learn the politics of local-level nationalism



(Hardiman, 1981, pp. 4). The state hence not only fails to provide security to its nationals by calling them 'illegal' encroachers but includes some 'non-nationals' who in the eyes of these hapless peasants are nothing but 'illegal' immigrants, people who do not even belong to the sovereign state of India. It is hence intriguing to note that the same agents who are hereby rejected by the state as heirs to legitimate land rights, are the ones voicing their own definition of who an Assamese is, borrowing ironically the same concept from the middle class or mainstream nationalists since the 1980s. In a vulnerable position as theirs, political freedom entangles deeply with economic rights, i.e. right over land. It has been argued that the germ of political turmoil in the Assam, to a great extent, is believed to be a function and reaction to land tenure policies introduced by the British, which left the Assamese peasantry in the plains as well as the tribal communities in the hills under severe land alienation pressure. Others like Alok Sheel (1986, pp. 231-253) rightly believe that the reason why millions of peasants responded to the nationalist call during the freedom struggle was the cause for land rights. However, such economic grievance theory partly discounts the role of different classes of the peasantry, and completely fails to take into account the rise of the 'rich peasant' as discussed in the first chapter (Hardiman, 1981, pp. 05).

Saikia provides a socio-historical account of the nature of peasantry in these reserved forests. The peasants who had arrived under the colonial government as already discussed, were able to emerge as rich landowners under that state initiative, since there was absence of any mechanism to put a check on the size of land holdings by the forest department. They began to cultivate and occupy a vast amount of land in return for their labour services to the forest department. Subsequently, with more and more lands being occupied by these rich peasants, other peasants from neighbouring villages found that cultivation of the other patches was difficult owing to shortage of agricultural labour. The presence of clay soil was excellent for the cultivation of fisheries and horticulture, especially betel plants which led to the accumulation of income for these categories of peasants and in the next few decades, they began playing a prime role in the control of affairs of these areas. They employed both their own labour and wage labour in their home gardens and fisheries. The second batch of immigrants in the 1950s in the post colonial state began to work as sharecroppers and tenants on the landowners' lands. With a shortage of arable land for cultivation, conflicts soon emerged among them, which was sometimes resolved by the state (since their migration was encouraged by the well mobilized left-wing), but provided

only temporary relief. These batches of peasantry constituted the second category as independent peasants. Those who had migrated in the 1960s began to construct their homes in the plains close to the Doyang river but in the next decade, strife arose among the next batches who had to settle down in the highlands. Saikia mentions that since the landowners had the means to employ the labour of these sharecroppers, they began clear small patches and work on their uncultivated lands. Severely limited to their access to cultivable lands both by the landowning class and the inter-state border dispute, the landless families had to make do with a hand to mouth sustenance. Moreover, some families also indulged in the lucrative sale of timber.

A highly productive cultivation of vegetables, spice, sugarcane, along with the potential availability of a small paddy field for self-consumption invited the traders to these localities, under the patronage of whom the peasants began to take up cash crop cultivation. These traders-turned moneylenders began to provide small loans to the cultivators in return for a fixed rate of crops after the harvest season. This became the third category of people as an independent (or under the tutelage of the rich landowners) money-lending class. Those who could not return their loans on time had to relinquish their lands to this class.

The first ever political struggle for land rights was back in 1968 in Doyang organized by the left leaning activists. Prior to that, there were occasional conflicts between the forest department and the peasants owing to the fact that some of these peasants had 'encroached' upon the tea garden lands. Owing to the border dispute, the Assam government also attempted at de-populating this area through eviction. There began to take shape a strong anti-eviction movement in 1973 when a small girl died during one such eviction drives. Incessant mobilization and support from the left wing and AASU led to the election of Soneswar Bora, a socialist leader into the Agriculture Minister under the Janata government in 1978. Chief Minister Golap Borbora also agreed to open the Doyang Reserved Forest to the peasants who had settled there post independence. So, the political mobilization brought along a certain sense of security manifested in the discontinuation of the eviction drives. However, the short lived Janata government failed to deliver any permanent solution to their problems. In 1981, the President's Rule was imposed on Assam into two years of the Assam Agitation and the central government began to take eviction drives seriously after massive deforestation was found to be hampering with the forest cover.

If one were to closely observe the internal differentiation among the peasants rallying against eviction, the Tengani movement (under BTUSS) had a radical political character stemming from the fact that poor peasants formed a majority in terms of the demographic content of the villages. The Doyang movement had as its participants mostly better off producers and this reflected their concern for larger political and economic issues like oil-drilling operations in the area and the Assam-Nagaland border dispute. It is mostly these classes engaged in the national question whereas the poorer peasants, sharecroppers who had lost their land due to debts and petty commodity producers from Tengani are more concerned with the security of tenure over plots of land, but they also time and again lend support to the wider political movement operating. The border dispute turns grotesque every now and then, and their fervour for protests against this do not perish. Saikia also observes an ideological and organizational distinction between the two-

“BTUSS held regular political training camps, where cadres learned about strategy, tactics and the history of class struggle in India. It also drew on radical traditions of conflict: in the 1950s, and also in the 1970s, when socialists were active in the occupation of forest lands while Congress took a conservationist stance. Where party allegiance was concerned, BTUSS nevertheless adopted a non-aligned position... In terms of agricultural policy, the BTUSS not only favoured and helped organize soft loans and cooperative arrangements but also determined crop prices. The twofold object of this particular strategy was both to assert claims to forest land and to reduce the dependence of cultivators on moneylenders” (ibid, pp. 53).

Being a diverse class of ‘low class-ness’, geographically distributed, often lacking the discipline and leadership that would encourage opposition of a more organized sort, the peasantry is best suited to extended guerrilla-style campaigns of attrition which require little or no co-ordination (Scott, 2008, pp. 5-35). The Doyang- Tengoni movement, as is popularly known, is spearheaded by the peasantry who in no terms lapse into Scott’s description. The inter-state border dispute has had no solution for decades now, and the government authorities of Assam only issued possession certificates to the Scheduled Caste members and not land patta. Owing to such insecurity of life due to eviction on the one hand and border violence on the other, the movement increased manifold since their inception, translating into the KMSS who believe that documents of tenurial security are the primary right that these so called “encroachers” require. In a meeting with the Chief Minister of Assam on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2006, the following demands were made (op. cit.):

1. As per the Forest Rules Handbook of the Environment and Forest Department, GOI, forest dwellers in Doyang be given land pattas. According to this Handbook if the state

government had declared any reserved forest as de-reserved before 25<sup>th</sup> October 1980, then the State Government need not avail permission of the Union government towards the settlement of the dwellers. As Doyang was declared de-reserved by the State Government in 1978 so issuing land *patta* to the forest dwellers of Doyang was overdue;

2. The reserved forest, which has not been declared de-reserved, the dwellers of those reserves be issued possession certificate for the interim period and let the Task Force suggest measures for *patta* to the dwellers.
3. As per the Schedule Tribe and the Traditional Forest dwellers Bill 2005, all tribal forest dwellers who have been in the forest continuously since 13<sup>th</sup> October 2005 need to be issued *patta*. The Bill was passed by the Parliament and the rules have also been announced. KMSS demanded settlement in different reserved forests of Assam as per the provisions of this Act.

Baruah (2005) argues the extending a set of rules, originally meant for isolated aboriginal groups, to less and less isolated groups living along with other ethnic groups and that too in the profoundly transformed conditions of the twenty first century can only produce a crisis of citizenship, leaving citizens with the choice of either seeking recognition as Scheduled Tribes in order to be able to enjoy ordinary citizenship rights in these ethnic homelands or accept de facto second class citizenship (pp. 11). In the light of this argument thus, we see how these forest dwellers or “encroachers” are deemed second class citizens, whose lives are secondary to others. The state refuses to provide them with the basic amenities of life- livelihood and shelter claiming them as illegal whilst they are still nationals of the state. Their nationalist assertions go unnoticed over the years, and as hardly any specific journal or newspaper carry their stories.

The chauvinist attitude of Assamese nationalism as referred to by Guha, transplanted the germ of political and ethnic turmoil in the state of Assam by undermining the role of other communities as subversive and saw itself as championing for the sake of all. Although the peasants rallying for land rights and other civil amenities are none other than Asamiyas themselves, their call for identification with the larger society goes overlooked, both by the popular intellectual discourse in the state and the state itself. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) that spearheaded the Assam movement back in the 1980s, have participated in the protest programmes of the Doyang-Tengani movement, however to no avail. Probably this is due to the fact that the constituents of

the movement are not the students and the middle classes but marginalized people- those whose voices hardly matter. Hirendra Nath Gohain (1985, pp. 31) articulates that the Assam movement was not confined to the middle class alone. It had a fairly broad based rural support, persuaded by land pauperism, indebtedness, and unemployment among rural youth. The peasantry was however not organized on class lines, but it was the national forces which paved the path for the Assamese peasants to have common cause with the Assamese middle class rather than with the immigrant peasants. Levels of consciousness hence did not operate on class lines but on national/ethnic lines, in stark contrast to the situation today when we find class terms being reinforced along with national identification.

Ranajit Guha's work seeks to demonstrate how the colonial discourse on peasant insurgency was dominated by the centrality of the "security of the state"- a problematic in the career of colonialism (cited in Saikia, 1996, pp. 12). This baggage was also however adopted by the state in Assam in the context of evictions. The peasant society is hence on the verge of two apparent tensions- the tension between the peasants and the state, and the tension between the settlers and the Nagas on the other side of the border. In other words, they are caught between two derogatory labels: illegal encroachers of forest land as well as inhabitants of a disputed border<sup>11</sup>. The peasantry, dependent on land and land alone, is fearful at the rate land seems to have passed into the hands of the 'outsiders'. As Arupjyoti Saikia argues-

"The Nambor and Doyang Reserved Forests were exposed to new intricacies of land settlement from the early 1960s. The district of Nagaland in Assam was declared a state in 1963, creating immediate dispute over the provincial boundary. The new state of Nagaland pushed forward an aggressive demand for a solution of the inter-state boundary problem. With the growing pressure from Nagaland, the general consensus amongst Assamese politicians was that the best way to retain control over the vast uninhabited border areas of Assam along Nagaland was to settle Assamese peasants in the forested tracts, thereby laying claim to the disputed boundary areas" (op. cit, pp. 102-03).

#### **4.6 The Asamiya Peasant Question**

The discussion brought forth in this chapter revolves around one central theme, the question of defining oneself in response or relation to the other. It is therefore imperative at this point to look at the relationship between the peasantry and nationalism, in particular, taking Assamese

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.telegraphindia.com/1160319/jsp/northeast/story\\_75305.jsp](https://www.telegraphindia.com/1160319/jsp/northeast/story_75305.jsp)

nationalism as the frame of reference. Weiner claims that middle-class nativist movements against the migrants emerge in those communities where the local population has an educated class that aspires to move into jobs held by migrants- in coveted official positions (1978, pp. 8). Beginning with the social and economic consciousness that developed amongst the Assamese intelligentsia against the imposition of Bengali as a medium of instruction and the employment of Bengalis in official positions under the colonial government, which also can be categorized into the first wave of Assamese nationality formation, one finds the instrumentalist approach under the Marxist school conducive to an understanding of the same. This approach emphasizes the importance of nationalism as a way of mobilization of the masses to serve particular ends, ends that serve a particular elite or particular social class. Each class depicts its own interests as the common interests of all the members of the society in an ideal form so as to portray them as rational and universal. The state as an institution is the manifestation of this community, exercising and championing a supposed common cause, that of representing national interest. The aftermath of the Assam agitation witnessed numerous ethnic mobilizations against the hegemonic institutions of the Assamese middle classes, thereby exposing the flawed character of the ideological underpinnings of the whole political movement. The latter part of the twentieth century hence reflects the instrumentative ends of the middle classes and the landed gentry themselves; the landlords protesting against the Assam Tenancy Act and the loose and somewhat coercive inclusion of all tribal communities under one umbrella term ‘Asamiya’.

This discourse of identification barely recognizes the other side of the question: the East Bengal peasants have from time to time attempted to adapt to the nationalist cultural and social institutions (Saikia, 2014, pp. 330). This attempt occurs in several spheres of their everyday lives such as their adherence to the norms of nationalist cultural institutions, like speaking the Assamese language. After decades of social isolation and neglect, they have begun to make claims to being the cultural citizens of Assam (ibid, pp. 331)<sup>12</sup>. There are thus multiple sides to this story: on the one hand, these migrant peasants face hostility from the other Asamiya communities settled in the Nambhor reserve forests. These ‘other’ communities themselves ironically represent the limitations of the mainstream discourse on land rights and identity. Their

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<sup>12</sup> They are what Sadiq calls ‘paper citizens’ where the illegal immigrant seek some documents (acquired mostly through illegal means) to legitimize their entry and stay in the new society until they become visible as citizens of that state (cited in Baruah, 2014). However, do documents serve as enough proof for gaining acceptance into the wider social setup?

identification of being 'natives' as opposed to the non-natives of the federal system of body politic runs parallel to the Assam Agitation of the twentieth century when all the communities residing in the Brahmaputra Valley coalesced against the increasing number of "illegal" migrants. The theory of uneven development translated into the core/periphery model perhaps lends a sympathetic understanding of this phenomenon.

In Nairn's schema (cited in Glenn, 1999, pp. 42), the elites in the core leave a large number of disgruntled and disenchanting natives in the periphery. The elites (or in our case the natives) of the periphery mobilize the people in their natives so as to divest the core of its power in the periphery. His theory is, of course, indicative of the class relationship between the elites and the masses, whilst in the context of this study, the frame of reference would be largely an ethnic dimension. The 'sons of the soil' consisting of the tribal communities residing in the Nambhor reserved forest would constitute the periphery, their claim to elitism being based upon being 'Asamiya' while the East Bengal migrants would be the 'Na-Asamiyas'. When we talk of divesting the power of the core in the periphery, it would simply imply the role of the state as the stated 'core' empowered with the legal right to evict all the inhabitants of the forest villages, irrespective of whatever claims they make to identity. The core of the periphery, i.e. the 'Asamiya' peasants thus inherit the baggage left behind by the Assam Movement. Such sentiments of antagonism are based not only on the access to cultivable land, but also on the politico-legal aspect of identifying oneself with the larger question of who is recognized as an Indian citizen and who is not. These peasants had mobilized themselves numerous times on the question of grant of tenurial security, if one day the state facilitates them with this right then such right would also be invested on the 'other' immigrant who therefore threatens their social base of existence.

In this study, an attempt has been made to discuss the discourse of peasant mobilization in India and in Assam in particular as a separate paradigm altogether. As Guha claimed from his Marxist understanding of the question of nationalism in India, it is the national and regional bourgeoisie which have similar interests in furthering the course of economic development for their particular ends. The leaders of the Assam movement, viz. student leaders, intellectuals, eager and potential politicians among others felt that there was a sharp demographic increase in the decades prior, and this would threaten the most basic force of all- that of minoritization and subsequent

erosion of one's own culture. The Indian state largely ignored this and refused to provide any solution. Peasant mobilizations became largely linked to this cause for political mobilization because freedom from foreigners on one's own soil implied security of tenancy for the landless peasants. Even before independence, the peasants in India never possessed exclusive rights over their lands, it was the kingdom which claimed the land as their own with an elaborate system of tax and rent collection through the zamindari, mahalwari and the taluqdari systems. It was hoped that this would change for the better, but in the post colonial period too it the state retained the right to acquire and compensate, thus reducing the peasant to tenant only (Gohain, 2015, pp. 9). The struggle for independence saw a section of upper castes and landowning groups partaking interest in saving their lands from landless labourers with the threat of losing their livelihood derived from rents.

Marxists like Amalendu Guha and Hiren Gohain believe that the Assam Movement was “gentry nationalism” and not “peasant nationalism” and upper classes utilized the “cudgel of chauvinism” to inspire the Assamese peasantry with a dream to bring about ‘national’ glory (cited in Kimura, 2013, pp. 51). Udayon Misra, on the other hand, refutes their claim by stating that antagonism was just as intense between the peasant population and the immigrants (1981, pp. 291). However, the fact cannot be ignored that if the anti-foreigner movement had been successful, their lands would be soon abandoned and the indigenous peasants could claim them. Many movement leaders had substantiated this claim so as to bring the peasantry into the fold of the movement. At the same time, these leaders also demanded that foreigners be evicted and deported from government owned reserves, alleging that many foreigners have occupied these lands illegally and hence needed to be evicted. Given that many indigenous too had settled in the government forest land along with the foreigners, the above step faced severe criticism from a section of this peasant society. Against this background hence, an intervention must be made to reflect on peasant nationalism as a separate political discourse, not however in complete disparateness to mainstream nationalism. In the sense that peasant nationalism too revolves around basic questions of political identity and cultural preservation, which in turn stems from competition for land resources. It is worth mentioning the Nellie Massacre of 1983 in this context, in which it was the tribal peasants who took up arms against the foreigners resulting in utter chaos and bloodshed. The germ of turmoil hence developed among the peasants manifesting in the form of collective violence in the rural area of Assam. An analysis of the



politics of riots between the indigenous peasants and the immigrant peasants detail the mannerisms whereby the peasantry does form a subject of a distinct political discourse. Added to this anti-immigrant greater Asamiya imagination is the politics of border.

Partha Chatterjee discusses that the peasants in India became aware in varying degrees of the realities of the nationalist politics, but their participation was marked by radical breaks and spells of inexplicable quiescence (1988, pp. 8). This is perhaps the characteristic feature of most peasant mobilizations, the movements under focus in this study represent similar tendencies. Chatterjee further remarks that the concept of 'community' in peasant consciousness is different from bourgeoisie consciousness (ibid, pp. 11). The latter operates from the premise of the individual and a notion of his interests; individuals hence come together into alliances on the basis of common interests (or shared preferences). In peasant consciousness, on the other hand, the solidarities do not grow out of collective action which is believed to be derived from being members of a community (ibid.). The helm of affairs of the Tengani movement was at the hands of the poor peasants of recent arrival for whom security of land was the primary concern, but rich and well-off peasants too took part in the movement for the greater cause of anti-eviction. The Doyang movement, on the other hand, was more concerned with a solution to the inter-state border conflict. Both these cases demonstrate how membership to a community of 'peasants', situated in a particular socio-cultural and historical scenario, bring forth ties of solidarities which in turn form the basis of collective action. Individual identities are hence derived out of collective identities. Let us also consider Wirth's contention that the inhabitants living close to the border are the most nationalist communities and they cling to their political identity most fiercely than any other. Both these propositions thus connote the significance of 'space' as location for social consciousness. Land is not solely a material/economic but also a social entity whereby people's access to it determines their social existence and power position vis-a-vis the state. The presence of the state itself in the nexus between villagers/peasants and land points to the fact that power tussle forms an important dimension in a sociological understanding of the phenomenon under consideration. Combining forces against the state implies contestation or resistance to the politico-legal structure thereby designating an aspect of study that calls into question the role of the modern welfare state, and significantly so if the resistance in question turns a nationalist leaf. Narratives of these voices of staking claim to belonging to the larger

Asamiya nationality is lost in the whims of depiction as ‘encroachers’ in a land that they have historically regarded as their own.

These claims are not unjustified; sudden armed attack by Naga militants force people to abandon their homesteads and farms and consolidate the possession by erecting signboards of Nagaland government overnight (Borah, 2012, pp. 43). The voices of nationalist assertion hence operate on two levels, on an economic level over the right to land rights and on a politico-cultural level over the right to identity. In the first, the landless peasants of the Tengani settlements and the Doyang reserved forests assert that as Asamiyas, they shouldn’t be treated on a similar manner as the ‘other’ encroachers, namely the Bengali Muslim immigrants. This brings to mind Mead’s definition of the identity as the sum total of a person’s conscious perception of the self as distinct from the other. It is argued that preference should be given to the indigenous peasants over the latter when the government provides land *patta*. Documents stating the ownership of land under the Government of Assam act both as a symbolic proof of identity and signify the geographical site or the location of the holder. While these peasants were never given any legal right over land, they created both an economic and cultural space of a peasant society (Saikia, 2014, pp. 105). If these villages are encroached by the Nagas from the other side of the inter-state border, these communities residing in the border areas would soon encounter more violence, and perhaps their cultural status would also be under threat. In the second, thus, these voices of nationalism from affected peasants living in the foothills along the reserved forests of Assam are hence assertions that derive their distinct character from the particular space of which they are part of; they are, in other words, locale voices that lend support to a broader narrative of Asamiya nationalism which is the subject of little debate and discussion in popular political and academic discourse.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation has elaborately discussed on the role of peasant nationalism in Assam with special reference to the politics associated with ‘unmindful’ cartographic imposition of boundaries between two states. It has sought to elaborate in detail the narratives of the subjects of the nationalist movement, through an interrogation of the various ideologies and positions of the Indian nationalist movement as well as the (sub)nationalist mobilization in Assam. It has been depicted that peasants, as conscious makers of their own history, are by and large influenced by larger political movements and lend support to these wider narratives; their voices, however, are either ignored or not given due recognition in the popular discourse. It is therefore suggested that their assertions be looked at as separate discursive paradigms. The study entails the significance of the distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’, conducive to the construction of identity formation and nationalist discourse. It also locates peasant struggles in forest villages, the study on which have not been reflected much in academic literature.

The peasants in question have been subjected to the process of marginalization on two levels- first, by the state that refuses to recognize their rights over the forest lands, and second, as a result of the violence incurred along the inter-state border of Assam and Nagaland. The study hopes to contribute to the scarce and nebulous literature available on forest villages, border politics and peasant mobilizations. It is based on the Doyang-Tengani movements in Assam that have brought about a new age to people’s protests, especially peasant protests.

The first chapter titled “Nationalism and Peasant Consciousness: An Overview” interrogates the relationship between Indian nationalism and Assamese sub-nationalism, their articulations and impact on peasant consciousness in general. It begins by looking at the rise of the nation-state in modern times through the colonial system of domination over what was already ‘nations’ which now sought to establish a ‘state’. It then interrogates into what a sociological study of nation and nationalism would entail as against a political science approach. A sociological approach to the study of these themes would analyse the process of globalization as a favourable factor for the rise of the nation-state and national identity. The cultural aspect in a socio-historical setting, as locating nations as conscious social elements as groups situating themselves in a global order of

self-reflection is one way of looking at the sociological dimension. Theories on nationalism can hardly be divorced from the social context of which its elements derive themselves from. Hence ethnicity, class and race are recurrent themes on the sociological literature on nationalism. Through an engagement with the debates of various scholars, it is argued that the milieu of nationalism in India began with the anti-colonial movement in the nineteenth century. From a Marxist perspective, it has been shown that the vanguards of the movement were the bourgeoisie who mobilized the peasants for the movement. Michel Hechter's thesis on Internal Colonialism depicts the core-periphery dichotomy in national development, explicating in detail why groups from the periphery revolt as they do. The sub-nationalist movements can thus be located within this background. It has been shown that there are certain similar traits of bigger nationalities and smaller nationalities. Moving on to the political and economic changes brought along by the British in North East India, it has been argued that the policy of drawing boundaries between the hills and plains, and the encouragement to bring in batches of workers from other areas like Chota Nagpur and East Bengal brought significant social changes in the demography. The discussion hence lays down the reasons why most political mobilizations in the North East resort to exclusivist 'ethnic' homeland movements. It also brings forth the 'chauvinist' attitude of the Assam Agitation of 1979, and the state responses to the same.

The second chapter titled "Peasant Nationalism in India and Assam" locates peasant consciousness through a tracing of the historiography of the genesis of the nationalist assertion among the peasants in general and in India. It engages with popular debates on the peasantry and also looks at the internal differentiation among it. James Scott's analysis of the peasantry provides an interesting account of what he terms the everyday struggles of the peasantry. He argues that it is the peasantry who would be the vanguard of any successful revolution and not the proletariat which is fatally linked to the capitalist class. Also, the relative distance of the rural from the urban areas makes the peasant community immune to hegemonic forms of formal institutions that hardly seep into the everyday life of the village unit. The radical potential of the peasantry lies in the moral economy of the peasantry in the aspects of religion and politics. For instance, their local system of action based on status, influence and authority (in other words, forms of exercise of power) seeks to constitute a distinct sphere of perception, information and moral obligation which is exclusive of outsiders. Others like David Hardiman emphasize on the role of the rich peasants in the nationalist movement in India, thus arguing for the peasants as

conscious and autonomous subjects. Similarly, Ranajit Guha also refutes the claim that the peasantry is not capable of mobilizing themselves. Theodore Shanin, Robert Redfield, Chayanov, Eric Wolf among others broadly defined peasants as those who are engaged in agricultural activities, and those who produce for their subsistence. Mao Tse-Tung believed that it was the poor peasants who were the most revolutionary in China. This brings us to the middle peasant thesis promulgated by the likes of Eric Wolf, Hamza Alavi and Dhanagare. They define the middle peasant as one who has a substantial amount of land under him, cultivates his own land and produces enough to sustain himself. The rich farmers are caught up in the whims of the capitalist economy while the poor peasants consisting of landless labourers and sharecroppers are too ignorant. It is thus the middle peasants who lend support to the nationalist cause for consolidation. Dhanagare also refers to the political role played by the *kisan sabhas* in mobilizing the masses. In the next section, the importance of the role of *raij mels* in Assam has been highlighted by recounting two main anti-colonial peasant revolts of the nineteenth century, the Phulaguri uprising and the battle of Patharughat. In the post colonial state, the Nellie massacre also serves as a useful reminder of the fact that peasants neither lack the potential nor the organization to bring about successful revolts.

The fourth and the last chapter titled “Forest Dwellers, Peasant Mobilization and Border Politics” explores the relationship between peasant mobilization at the grassroots level and border politics under the rubric of Asamiya nationalism. It begins by providing a brief history of the two sites under study; the Nambhor (Tengani) reserved forest and the Doyang forest. Both lie along the Nagaland border, thus being prone to attacks and conflicts from the Naga side. The communities settled in these two forest lands constitute a myriad of indigenous tribes, all of whom constitute the greater ‘Asamiya’ community. Ranajit Guha had suggested that territoriality as the intersection between ethnic and physical space is a significant condition for peasant insurgency. No other example would perhaps be conducive to this element from which peasant consciousness is derived. This chapter traces the historiography of the formation of the greater Naga sentiment today associated with the demand for the creation of exclusive Naga homeland. It also discusses the processes by which immigration began to bring changes in the existing social structure and agrarian landscape. It also locates the marginalization of the inhabitants of the forest villages in the name of eviction by the state, thereby legitimizing the space created for peasant politics. It argues that the peasant politics in Doyang and Tengani are not divorced from

the nationalist question of identity. They identify with the greater Asamiya nationality, being defined so as the outcome of the Assam Movement. Construction of 'self' in relation to the 'other' hence is of vital importance, particularly so if the 'other' in question is a Bengali - Muslim who holds onto a different marker of cultural identity. The chapter also discusses the alternative and subjugated narrative whereby these immigrant peasants claim to be assimilated into the Assamese society, therefore bringing out how the dichotomy of core/periphery also exists in the periphery. Again, it is argued that the category of 'other' differs in time and context. What constituted 'other' in the first wave of Asamiya nationalism in the nineteenth century is the category of Bengali Hindus, whilst after the 1980s it shifted to the political category Bengali Muslims. It is shown that membership to a community of 'peasants', situated in a particular socio-cultural and historical scenario, bring forth ties of solidarities which in turn form the basis of collective action. Individual identities are hence derived out of collective identities.

It is, therefore, the objective of this work to show that nationalism entails the definition of the exclusivist tendencies. It is a modern phenomenon, with strong roots into symbols of primordial origin. The modernist perspective on its own would not present a whole-some understanding, nor would primordialism. The ethno-symbolist school, somewhat of a middle ground, can provide a better explanation for the phenomena under consideration. Smith describes it as the study of ethnies, 'named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity' (Smith 1986, pp. 32) As one scholar remarks, there were no 'Assamese' or 'Asamiya' a few centuries back. The sentiment of nationality is of a much recent origin, brought about by the penetration of modern forces into the landscape like capitalism. It was intensified by the prospect of losing out on important positions in the administration in the nineteenth century, and one socio-economic marginalization in the twenty first. Claims to nationality are based upon certain signs and symbols- like the usage of the Assamese language, inhabitation of the same territory, sharing of sacred spaces and so on. The ethno-symbolist perspective is hence better equipped to take on this analysis.

The research questions with which the study began reflects the hollowness of the nationalist project at the national and regional level because of which peasant mobilizations have found to be persistent in the post colonial historiography. The question of land, and subsequently political identity was associated with both the nationalist movements as discussed, however, to serve the

interests of the different classes of people staking a claim to them. Peasant question took a backseat in the entire trajectory, only surfacing when they are deemed instrumental. It is therefore important to further enquire why their issues are not given due importance, even when they revolve around the basic economic force, i.e. land which is fundamental to the nationalist mobilizations. While it is ironic that the Asamiya peasant borrows the same pointers of distinguishing between the indigenous and the “outsider” from a movement, which though addressed some fundamental questions of the masses refrained from the occupancy rights of the peasants in particular, why do the mainstream or the middle class nationalists champion a form of nationalism that exclude their own people as opposed to the “other”? Is it due to their social and political location as forest villagers or does it involve a form of power play from which the legitimacy to be a nationalist movement is derived? Again, why are the narratives of the “outsiders” not taken into account even though they assert their assimilation into the larger Assamese society? These questions entail further research which in turn would broaden the scope of comprehension on peasant nationalism from the border areas.

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