

**IDENTITY, GROUP-CONFLICT AND SUBNATIONALISM:
THE ASSAM EXPERIENCE**



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Ivy Dhar

**Centre for Political Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110 067.**

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SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

CERTIFICATE

Certified that the Dissertation entitled "Identity, Group-Conflict and Subnationalism: The Assam Experience" submitted by Ivy Dhar, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of this University. This dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University, or any other University.

We recommend that this Dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Dr. Sudha Pai
(Chairperson)

(actly ch.)

CHAIRPERSON
Centre for Political Studies
School of Social Sciences-II
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067

Dr. Sudha Pai
(Supervisor)



Dedicated to . . .
My Late Father

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(Joy Dhar)

Preface

Assam has always been a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual state. The migration of foreigners into Assam is not a recent phenomenon. It is very difficult to say, who actually constitute the indigenous population. Almost all groups living here seem to have come to the region, from different places at different points of time. But, Assam's inclusion into British India has given a new direction to the process of migration. A line of demarcation was drawn between the 'indigenous' and 'outsiders' and a cry for the protection of 'Assamese identity' began to germinate.

Identity formation among the Assamese community has not taken place as a result of mere self-discovery, but a fear of being overwhelmed by demographic change. When they were threatened on economic and cultural front, the Assamese clutched to their identity of language and culture, to feel distinct. This feeling of distinctiveness gave way to the political expression of 'subnationalism'.

Assam's relationship with the rest of India has her own legacy of emotional and psychological ambivalence. The feeling of separateness was strengthened with the political subversion of its cultural existence. This threat of dominance by the national elite, fermented the idea of sovereign independent Assam. The expression of Assamese subnationalism gave a new definition to not only its relation with the Indian nation but also with other ethnic groups of Assam.

The dissertation is titled as "**Identity, Group-Conflict and Subnationalism: The Assam Experience**". The study fundamentally looks at the birth, growth and contemporary discussions on Assamese identity with focus on the politics of subnationalism. In the wake of

conflict among the ethnic groups, these issues become more important.

Chapter I begin with the **Introduction** to the ideas and issues raised in the following chapters. A quest has been made to provide a theoretical framework of the proposed study.

Chapter II is subtitled as **Genesis of Assamese Identity: A Prelude to History**. It gives a historical perspective to the growth of Assamese identity and the emergence of Assamese subnationalism.

Chapter III delves into the **Multi-Faceted Dimensions of Nation-State and Subnationalism: The Post-Independence Period**. It moves on with the debate of nation building and it's discourses with subnationalism. It also focuses on the various interest of the Assamese community and it's impact on the identity syndrome.

Chapter IV deals with the **Fragmentation of Assamese Identity and the Ideology of an Assamese Nation**. It looks into the internal conflict of Assam and the idea of a Swadhin Axom.

Lastly, the **Conclusion** gives an overview of the trends present in the study and attempts to frame a working paragon for the Assamese identity to co-exist with the pan-Indian Identity.

It becomes difficult to talk about the Assamese identity without looking into the interest of other ethnic groups. With regards to the sentiment of the Assamese people and other ethnic groups of Assam, the study takes up their problem and issues. At no point they should be misunderstood. Because, this study is to know and understand them and not to analyse them.

Dated: 20/07/2001

Ivy Dhar

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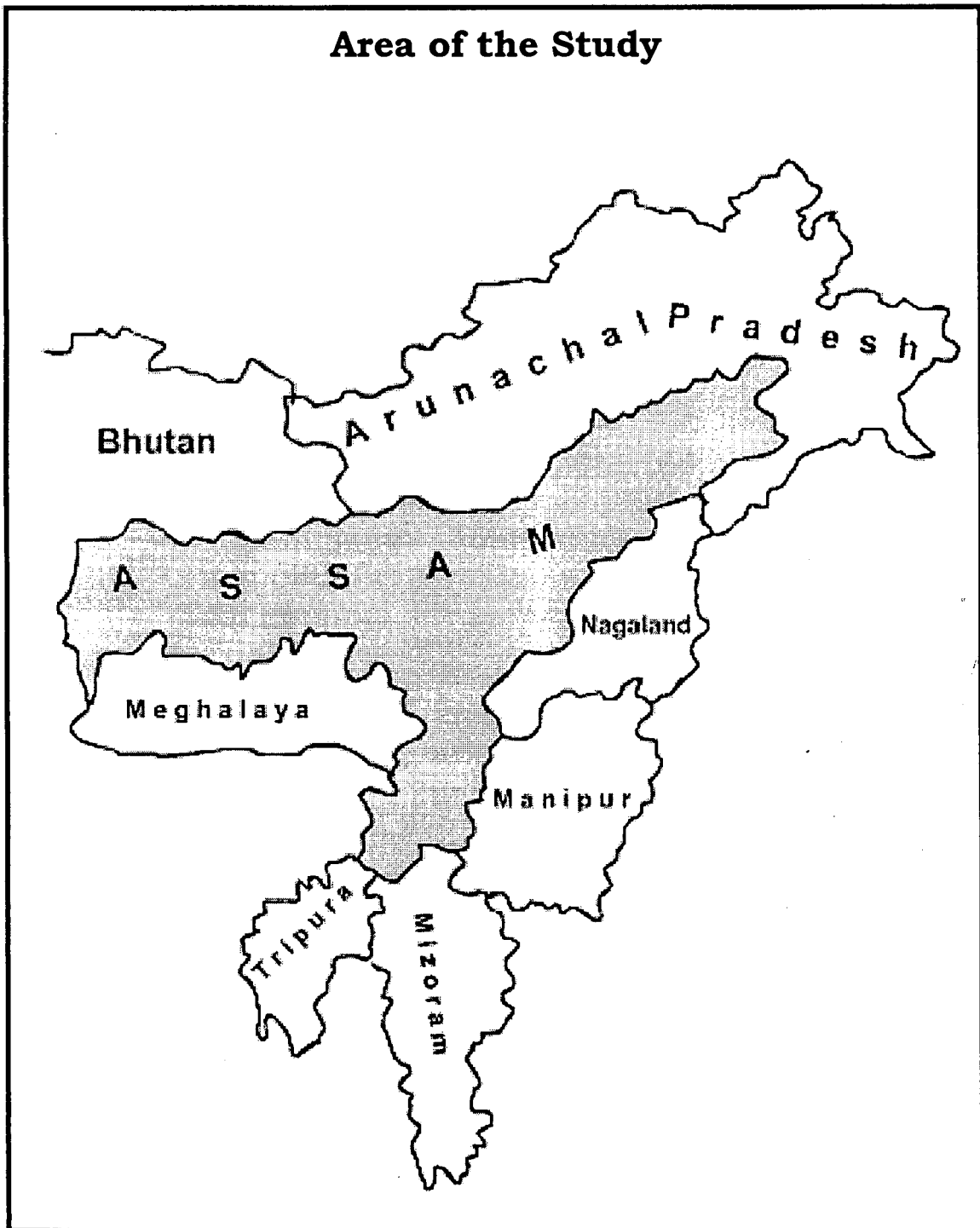
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Source: Baruah, Sanjib, 1999.

Introduction

Discussions and debates on a congruent approach to the multi-ethnicity of India, has been drawing our attention persistently for a long time. An appropriate layout that addresses the problem at its various dimensions is yet to surface. The challenges that keeps on the headlines are issues mostly related to ethnic assertion, in the name of religion, language, caste, race etc. Thus, the Indian State is besieged with multiple identities, which are either cross-cutting each other or are transmigrating into one another to form specified groups. *M. N. Karna* explains ethnic identity as the subjective and symbolic use of certain elements of culture, by a group to differentiate themselves from other groups.¹

The situation in Assam is very fragile, it needs a perspicuous study on the underlying facts. The diverse groups of Assam are either demanding separate and autonomous state on the basis of their lingo-cultural identities or constitutional protection of their respective identities. Though, the Assamese constitute the principle population of Assam, but is not the only group residing the state. There has been a flow of different races of mankind, the Aryans, the Austric, the Mongoloid, and the Dravidians into this belt, partly due to its

¹ Karna, M.N; "Ethnic Identity and Socio-economic Processes in North-East India" in Kailash. S. Agarwal (ed.); *Dynamics of Identity and Inter-groups Relations in North-East India*"; Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1999; p.29.

geographical location and partly because of historical reasons. Despite differences in language and culture, there has been a socio-cultural fusion among them and all of them contributed towards the growth of the Assamese society. But, this process received a tremendous setback during the British rule when, several economic and political changes had sharpened the differences. Subsequently, in the post-colonial phase, these groups became more conscious of maintaining their identity. Our focus of study will be the Assamese community and from this we can reach to a level of understanding on the line of distinction between the Assamese and other composite groups of Assam.

There has been a long stretch of colonial history backing up the Assamese psyche of conceiving itself as a distinct community. This resulted in an ardent manifestation in the post colonial period in the form of movements like the language movement of 1960, the medium of instruction movement of 1972, and the Assam movement (1979-85). With the growth of the extremist outfit ULFA, the Assamese identity found its radical expression. *Apurba Baruah* conceives the term 'identity' as the national aspiration of the Assamese. Such aspirations are often premised on a poetics about a homeland, its people and their language. These possibilities are to be formulated, propagated and defended in the battlefield of politics. The cultural policies will be vaguely understood unless they are seen as episodes of political mobilization. The theme of asserting the autonomy and distinctiveness of Assamese language and culture are thus, historically intertwined with the Assamese subnational discourse.

When we link 'identity' with 'subnationalism' it is a socio-cultural movement for political space. It is in the process of interaction

with other groups, the group fulfills such aspirations and becomes organized to frame such movements. The quest for 'identity' is premised on group consciousness. But, at the same time not all groups consciousness can assume the form of identity movement because they have to be historically placed in the phenomenon of events. This explanation will be vivid if we draw a theoretical framework.

1.01: Conceptualising 'Assamese Identity'

Manorama Sharma's work on group identity is inspired by *Erikson's* psychological analysis of an individual's identity. Following on the same line, she draws out these features:

1. Identity is not inherent to a community/group² by the fact of it's mere existence.
2. The phenomenon of identity evolves through a process of development; i.e. the question of identity can emerge only when the community/group has reached a particular stage of development.
3. It is to be basically viewed from historical perspective.
4. As the community/group undergoes changes, the character of it's identity or it's manifestation will also undergo changes.
5. In the acquisition of identity by a community or group the factor of socialization is very crucial.

² There cannot be a sharp line of distinction between community and group. The community may have a large role to play than a group. Like the Assamese community which may include various caste groups or religious groups or the Brahmin community of India may include various language groups. The role of community is extended as well as limited. Like the Bengali community includes only the Bengali language group.

Therefore, identity first has to be historically located not only in the evolution of a group or a community but also studied in its various manifestation depending upon the dominant or hegemonic values of socialization.³

While examining the above-mentioned analogue in the context of Assamese identity, we move on from a generic explanation to focus specifically on the Assamese community. The Assamese as a community have a long historical existence. Today, it may have a distinct linguistic identity but seeing the configuration of the region, it was never monolingual. As the region is an admixture of different races, people speaking different dialects have lived together and formed a part of the composite Assamese community. It is necessary to probe into the fact that how the Assamese language became the insignia of loyalty to the Assamese community?

Though, the Assamese language was the official language during the Ahom administration, but was not identified with any sort of ethnic consciousness. This particular stage of development was when the colonial rule brought major changes to the region. It was then, a new force called the 'educated middle class' came into existence. The upper caste Assamese who held important position during the Ahom rule were also the first to reap the benefits of education in the British rule. Thus, they constituted this new force i.e. the Assamese middle class. But, it took some years for the Assamese to reach this position and by that time, the British had brought in the English-educated

³ Sharma, Manorama; "Identity: Inherent or Evolved?" in Girin Phukon (ed.); 'Politics of Identity and Nation-Building in North-East India'; South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 1997; p. 20.

Bengalis for administrative convenience. The Bengalis in order to consolidate their position in Assam were successful in coaxing the British to replace Assamese language for Bengali language in the courts and schools (1837). Slowly with the crystallization of the Assamese middle class, the cry for 'Axomiya'⁴ identity saw its first manifestation in the demand for restoration of the Assamese language (1873). It is in the late nineteenth century, that the question of identity began to emerge and further intensified during the twentieth century, when the Assamese community had reached a certain stage of development i.e. the 'stage of maturity'. At this stage, in the case of individual a consciousness develops likewise, it is the same for a community. Therefore, identity emerges out certain consciousness in the historical stage of development of that community. As, in the case of Assamese, it was the consciousness of language. The question also arises that why do particular type of consciousness tend to manifest?

To understand this we rely on *Manorama Sharma's* proposition where she relates the manifestation of identity to the dominant values of socialization. An ethnic group can be defined only through its relationship with the 'other'. The consciousness of its cultural uniqueness are to be seen as a result of a long term social process which means groups must have a minimum contact with each. To study identity, as an aspect of social relationship, it is necessary to dig into its economic aspect. The argument put forward by *Girin Phukon* is "such identification with distinct symbols are aimed mostly for

⁴ Though some writers use 'Assamiya' instead of 'Axomiya'. Transliteration of Assamese words into English spelling usually robs of the actual pronunciation. The letter 'x' is used here instead of 's', which is more accurate to the Assamese sound.

realization of material benefits and rarely a psychological satisfaction".⁵ Therefore, the restoration of Assamese language was important, because it would be detrimental to the position of the Bengalis and help the Assamese achieve it's own class interest.

The assertion of identity has been explained as a reaction developed in the process of modernization. When new opportunities develop there is migration from other places so, the earlier inhabitants have to now enter into a competitive relationship with the migrated population in politics and labour market. *Paul Brass* in his book, '**Ethnicity and Nationalism**' (1991) had made it clear that ethnic identities are to be seen as a process of elite competition within boundaries determined by political and economic realities.

The flow of the migrant population into Assam during the nineteenth and twentieth century was a part of the modernization process. Assam opened to new economic changes like the development of the tea industry, introduction of railways etc., it was the migrant population who could take a better advantage since, the Assamese were reluctant in their approach and had less infrastructure. But, when the Assamese saw the economic advancement of the migrant population vis-à-vis their own backwardness, this led to the growth of cultural apprehension. Because along with the capitalist development there was a swift demographic change.

The Assamese elites faced stiff competition specially from the Bengalis, who had occupied the government jobs which the Assamese aspired for. But, along with the Assamese elites, the peasant

⁵ Phukon, Girin, op. cit., no.3; p.123.

population was also facing competition from the incoming Bengali Muslim peasants. The Assamese became apprehensive of the Bengalis because, they had become a considerable part of the demography. Fear of being swamped out led to the development of identity consciousness among the Assamese.

Moreover, the Bengalis were trying to prove that Assamese was merely a distorted form of Bengali language. The Assamese intellectuals had to make the case very clear that they were a distinct people with a unique language and culture. The notion that seem to grip the Assamese community according to *Sanjib Baruah* is that “a ‘developed’ language is a sign of a developed people, so the ‘development’ of the language could be the road to the ‘development’ of the people speaking that language”.⁶ This becomes evident from the names of the organisations born out of this context, like the *Axomiya Bhaxa Unnati Xadhini Xobha* (Association for the development of the Assamese language). As *Lakshinath Bezbarua* wrote that the goal of such Xobha was to the enable the mother tongue to ‘reach the heights of other rich and prosperous language of the world and illuminate with it’s glorious rays the face of... poor and backward Assam’.⁷ A connection was drawn between the Assamese language and material progress of Assam. Such sentiments were found in other middle class organizations like the *Jorhat Xarbojonik Xabha*, *Axom Xahitya Xobha*. The motto of the *Axom Xahityo Xabha* was ‘My mother language-my eternal love’. Thereby we see the growth of Assamese cultural nationalism.

⁶ Baruah, Sanjib; *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*; Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999; p.72.

⁷ *ibid.*

1.02: Understanding the Emergence of Assamese Subnationalism

Along with such cultural ferment, there was a strong political consciousness growing among the Assamese. Appeals to the British government regarding people's grievances were led by organizations like the Assam Association (1903). The Assamese elite had already begun to conceive of nationalism and with the formation of Assam Congress in 1920, the Assamese participated in the Indian National Movement. This does not mean that, it was for the first time the Assamese were linked with the Indian National sentiment. It was ever since the revolt of 1857, when *Maniram Dewan* had sacrificed his life. Also, it must be noted that the birth of nationalism did not grow out of only the hands of the Assamese elite, there had been series of peasant revolt against the British even during the nineteenth century. What is actually meant that a organized movement has to be placed historically at some point of time.

Though the Assamese were able to co-relate with the Indian national movement and were fighting to release themselves from the British rule. But stress was laid more on the protection of the Assamese people. In awe of serious demographic changes, the Assamese felt a threat from the outsiders. This is how the feeling of 'Assam for Assamese' made it's way through. Organizations like the *Axom Xomrokshini Xobha* (Sabha for the conservation of Assam) demanded the rights of the children of the Assamese soil. Newspapers and journals tried to arouse the consciousness among the Assamese people of their self-identity. Certain sections of the elite also distinguished between 'Bharatiya Swaraj and 'Axomiya Swaraj'. Along with the Indian national movement, a strong sentiment of Assamese

subnationalism also grew side by side. Thus, the Assamese identity took strong roots in the nationalistic aspirations of an Assamese homeland.

The idea of a homeland is attached to a definite territory and its past memories. *Anthony Smith* explains this co-relation as “territorialization of memory” and therefore boundaries of a homeland may be determined by military, economic or political factors, but their significance for their inhabitants derives from the joys and sufferings associated with a particular ethnoscape”.⁸ This was quite evident in the case of Assam, whose territories receded or expanded according to the compulsion of time, by imperialistic design or political upheavals. The Assamese sentiment exploded when Assam was supposed to be included in Pakistan along with East Bengal at the time of independence. Assam would have been in Pakistan unless rescued by leaders like *Gopinath Bordoloi* and *Mahatma Gandhi*. It was no doubt a planned move by the Muslim League to entrap Assam into Pakistan. The Assamese also felt that the Indian Congress was beguiling them, since they didn’t show any concern for the region. With India’s independence, cracks had already developed in the relation of the Centre with the people of Assam.

Two important points are to be taken into account. Firstly, the Assamese subnationalism grew in the same area of historicity along with the Indian nationalism. Thus with the birth of the Indian nation, the Assamese subnationalism was also carried forward in the post-independence era. Secondly, the Assamese community was trying to

⁸ Smith, Anthony, D; “ Culture, Community and Territory: The Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism” in *International Affairs*, Vol.72 (3), 1996; p.454.

cope with many new changes like demographic transition, territorial adjustments, cultural threat etc. so, the manifestation of identity took different forms apart from language, like culture, territory or even religion. Writers like *Girin Phukon* and *Manorama Sharma* has emphasized that identity do not fix on a particular symbol or value permanently, it depend on its social, economic or political relationships with other groups.

1.03: Important Aspects of Group-Conflict

In Assam, there were many issues, which produced conflict among groups, and one such was migration. Migration in the post-independence era was defined as an onslaught that India had to face following partition, but unfortunately this region had to face the most of it. Though, on the western side, it carried on within a time frame, on this side there seems to be no limitation. This raises the question of the legality of the migrant population. Increase in population raised two important socio-political issue (1) tensions between Assamese and non-Assamese (2) Hindu-Muslim question.

More than a Hindu-Muslim complexion, the tensions put up a face of linguistic threat. Mainly because of certain factors:

Firstly, the Assamese Muslims are considered to be part of the Assamese society. Historically they shared a cordial relation with their Hindu counterparts.

Secondly, along with the Assamese Hindus the Assamese Muslim also resisted the infiltration of Bengali Muslims. Though, at certain points of time, in some sections there was pro-Muslim bent.

Thirdly, the Bengali Muslims were never equated with the indigenous Muslim population. The Assamese rather saw the Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslim as similar segments, no matter how different they are. The Assamese made every arrangement possible to counter the Bengali domination. Language had played the primary role, which puts religion to secondary position in the inter-group relationship in Assam.

When an ethnic group is placed in relation to another in an interactive situation, certain characteristics stimulate ethnic self-awareness in a 'we-they' contradictions:

1. Cultural difference can be a form of identity manifestation when the groups share a competitive economic relationship.
2. In *Barthian* sense, "ethnicity is viewed as the social organization of cultural difference".⁹ Cultural demarcation will be exponential when expressed in concrete institutional or organizational form. After, it is organised then at some level there will be social ramifications i.e. will fragment into varied offshoots Which is what exactly happened in Assam. The cultural distinction between the Assamese and non-Assamese were institutionalised by the Assamese civil society into mass movement. The tribal population of Assam seeked a separation from the Assamese. From the inter-group conflict a new phenomenon came which is intra-group conflict.

⁹ Nair, K.S; "Ethnicity, Identity and Integration" in A.D. Pant and Shiva. K. Gupta (ed.); 'Multi-Ethnicity and National Integration: A Politico Anthropological View'; Vohra Publishers and Distributors, Allahabad, 1985; p.102.

3. The dominant-subordinate relationship in political representation also have cultural implications. The Assamese seek a distinction from the Indian heartland because they feel, they are not well represented in the mainstream. The Core-periphery power structure influences such relations, not only between the Assamese and the Indian national group but also between the Assamese and tribal groups.

The economic social and political interest is co-related to each other which in a multi-dimensional process influences group-consciousness. These aspects have a historical eminence. Therefore, the study takes up colonial period to establish a link with the post-independent period.

1.04: Phases of the Study

Though, the study cannot be tracked down in a single process, which follows a unilinear development. There cannot be a sharp line of demarcation between each period. But by reading upon the dominant trends, the study has been conveniently categorised into the pre-independence era and the post-independence era; which has been further divided into two phases. (1) from the time of India's independence to the Assam-Accord phase (2) the post Accord phase.

The study of the colonial period gives a historical background and the birth of Assamese identity. In the first phase of the post-independence era the Assamese identity is formulated vis-à-vis the non-Assamese (Bengalis especially) and in the second phase, the Assamese identity is contested with the other ethnic groups of Assam.

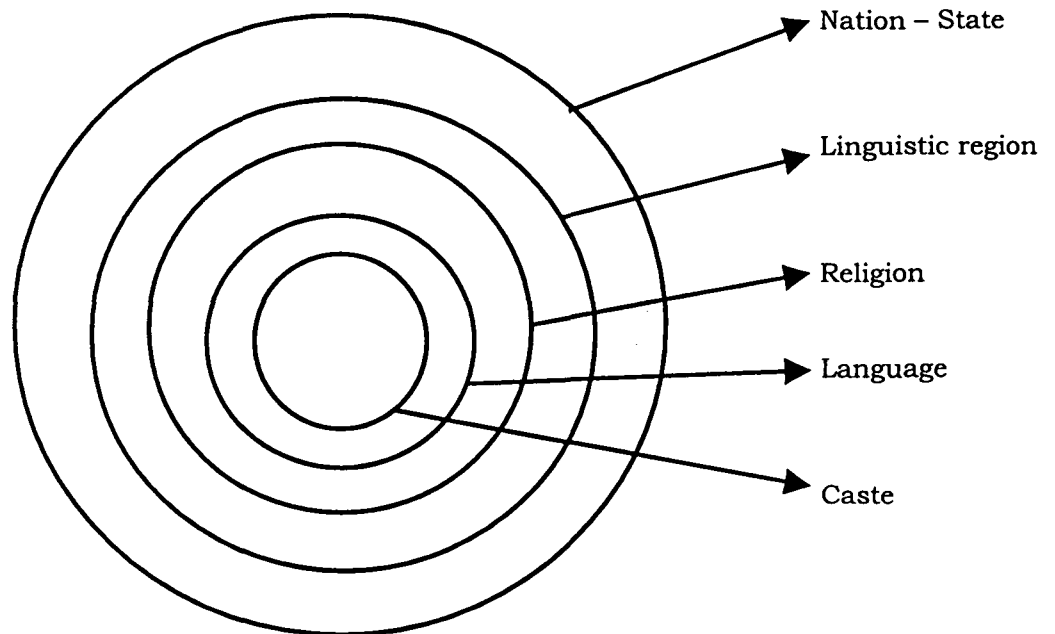
This does not mean that the Assamese identity was totally unchallenged in the earlier phase otherwise territorial fragmentation of Assam would not have been possible. The hill people like the Nagas, Khasis and others, who wanted a separation from Assam can be understood, as they were never assimilated in the Assamese society. But, when the plain tribal demanded separation from the Assamese, who had experienced certain amount of assimilation the problem becomes much complex. It is in the later phase the internal challenges needs to be studied in depth.

Another trend that is examined in the two phases is the question of nationalism. The first phase throws light on the intellectual foundation of the Indian nation-state and subnationalism. The word 'sub' is qualified to the nationalist aspirations of the Assamese because it co-exists with pan-Indian nationalism. Whereas in the second phase, the contest is between the 'Indian nation' and the 'Assamese nation'. Assamese subnationalism takes a radical turn with the rise of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) who believe in the separation of the Assamese nation from India.

1.05: National Identity and Ethnic Identity.

The nation-state is viewed as the most supreme legitimate political institution, but groups are organized on ethnic lines as well. The concept of nation' does not loose significance in the whole development process. But the Indian identity is not just restricted to Indian nation, there are other variants of loyalty as well (Fig. 1.1).

Fig.1.1 Identity of an Indian



Source: Pant, A.D. and Gupta, S.K. (ed.), 1985; p. 103.

Some important points are to be noted, while emphasising on the criteria of loyalty. Firstly, there may not be just vertical differentiation among groups, but also horizontal differentiation within groups. E.g. A schedule caste from U.P. and a schedule caste of Assam may be vertically placed against the upper caste but do not share much commonality among them. Loyalty to a group is multi-faceted, which includes all criteria's, caste, language, region etc.

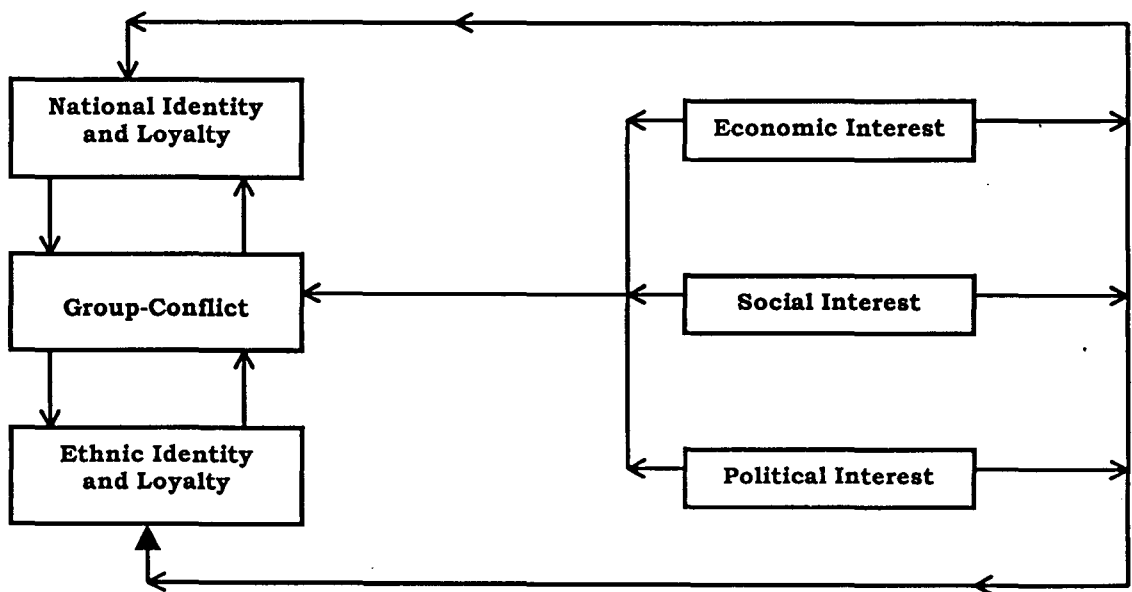
Secondly as *Salina Mehta* says, that "assertion of national identity is universally applauded but expression of ethnic identity is viewed by nationalistic ideologue as narrow and divisive ethnocentrism".¹⁰

¹⁰ Mehta, Salina; "Dilemma of Identity Assertion in a Pluralistic Society: A Case Study of Indian Polity"; *Eastern Anthropologist*, Vol.42(3), July-September,1989; p.268.

Thirdly, *Girin Phukon* emphasize that, “in the process of interaction the groups fulfill their socio-economic and political aspiration and in turn they change the intensity of the identity in terms of nation and ethnicity.¹¹

The national identity and ethnic identity are related in a two way process. When national loyalty is framed on a dominant culture, then group conflict is between the pan Indian culture and subnational culture, the smaller groups shifts their intensity of identity to maintain their ethnic aspirations. But when, these ethnic groups wants to enter the national mainstream, and give a nationalistic face of their identity, then the group-conflict is between the dominant ethnic value of the group & its other sub groups. The eco-social political interests are co-related and have multi-faceted impact on identity, and group-conflict. This has been illustrated in the following model.

Fig 1.2: The Conflict Model



¹¹ Phukon, Girin; 'Assam's Attitude to Federalism'; Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1982; p.124.

The Assamese national imaginings and identity manifestations are much more than their affirmation to exist as a distinct community. Their interest lies in the development of Assam which has been put forward by many writers. These literatures give a public face to the problem. Apart from writer's, the lyricist and poets have their contribution. Here, we illustrate songs of two renowned public figures. Of the yester years, we have *Lakshinath's Bezbaruah's* writings and from the contemporary times we draw upon *Bhupen Hazarika*. They have conversed with the people through songs, building up their confidence. Few lines from *Bezbaruah's* writing are as follows:

"Aami Axomiya nohon dukhiya,

Kihor dukhiya hom?

Xokolo aasil, xokolo aase,

Nuguno nalao gom

Bojok doba,bojok sankho,

Bokok mridong khol

Axom aakhau unnatir pothat

Joi aai axom bol"

These words mean 'we the Assamese can never be poor, In what sense are we poor? We had everything and we have everything but only to realise... let the music blow that Assam will be again on the path of progress; *Hail O' mother Assam*'.

The same song has been re-composed by *Bhupen Hazarika*, who takes a more bold and radical position. He reacted to *Bezbaruah's* affirmation that 'we the Assamese can never be poor'. Thus gave a call to 'Arise, Assam'. It goes in the following versus:

*“Aami axomiya nahao dukhiya
Buli xantona lobole nahobo,
Azir axomiya nizoke nichinile,
Axom rokhatore jabo”*

The above stanza can be read as ‘we the Assamese can never be poor, just to console us in these words is not the way out; unless today’s Assamese know themselves, Assam will go out of our hands’.

The song goes on to pay tributes to the Assamese historical and cultural heroes, talks of Assamese multi-culturalism, and shares values with Indian nationalism.

Then, what is it that is drawing so huge gap between the two nationalisms? Both the Assamese and Indian have immense respect for motherland and have many other similarities. Then, why the people always perceive a threat from the Indians? The study proceeds to draw an analysis of such question according to the relevant facts known.

1.06: Literature Survey

The principle accusation by the people of the North-East against the studies which have dealt with ‘ethnicity and nationalism were, the North-East was not receiving the right kind of attention. They are just theory-oriented studies and not people-oriented. Most of the literatures are from a western perspective or written down by writers who have scarce knowledge about the culture of the land. Even if, some studies that have tried to focus on the region, are very general and do not deal with the intricacies of the problem.

In the contemporary years, the scene may a bit different from before. We come across literatures that are written down by native

scholars. There are renowned political scientists, historians, anthropologist, sociologists, litterateurs or even journalist, and much of their thinking may be popular but yet to be included in the mainstream thought. Naming a few are *Girin Phukon, Sanjib Baruah, Manorama Sharma, Apurba Baruah, H K Barpujari, B Phakem* and *Pradip Phonjouban*. It is futile, to say that there is a dearth of materials but what lacks is that they are not given an adequate limelight. Though, there are certain differences in these writers way of handling the issues but, they all seem to agree upon the fact that studies on the North-East should have a historical perspective. The question of identity in each community are history-specific, it has been a proven fallacy to evolve a generalized theory. Peace process can be initiated in the region, when there is accommodation along with an understanding of this specificity in the mainstream discourses.

Sanjib Baruah argues upon that problems in Assam may seek a distinct voice but they are rather the echoes of the Indian people. Trying to subvert them would mean India having lost its own voice. His book, *"India against itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality"*(2000) explains that there is a huge gap between the subnational narratives and the pan-Indian discourses and filling it does not mean that we have to take a long leap forward. The idea is already there, what needs to be done is its refinement i.e. establishment of a strong federal policy. He says weak federalism and a strong Centre have proved to be a failure, by being unresponsive to the multiple public spheres. There is a serious disjuncture between the Assamese public sphere and pan-Indian public sphere.

Subnationalism he feels, is the result of political mismanagement and faulty policy structure. The book takes a long journey from framing the issue to solving it, and in between raises several issues. Throughout, he is trying to question whether Assamese subnationalism can be brought closer to Indian nationalism. Ultimately, he concludes it is possible to do so within the existing federal structure. There is a tremendous change required in the present attitude to federalism.

This is exactly where *Girin Phukon* had begun his book, titled “*Assam’s Attitude to Federalism*’ (1984). Though his book basically deals with the problems of federalism in India, the centrifugal and centripetal urges of the Assamese sentiment. He devotes a whole chapter related to the issue of identity and subnationalism called ‘*Contemporary Socio-Political Issues*’. Because, these factors have shaped the Assamese sense of asserting autonomy within the post-independent federal structure. His main focus in this chapter is to trace the colonial history of Assamese subnationalism which has grown along with the Indian nationalism. But, his whole argument is based on an elitist approach. He draws out Assamese subnationalism only from the hands of the Assamese elite. Though, they are the one’s who influences India’s policies towards the states. But it would be incomplete without talking about the peasant class.

Udayon Mishra have succeeded in his mission while discussing on Assamese subnationalism, he emphasize on the deep nexus between middle class assertion and peasant revolution. His book ‘*The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-state in Assam and Nagaland*’ (2000), discusses on the problem in Assam and Nagaland.

Here, we are concerned with the Assamese identity, which he narrates as “the Quest for Swadhin Asom”. The quest is embedded in the mindset since the colonial times, which results in conflicts and contradictions in the post independence era.

The contradiction resulted from the economic backwardness of the region due to the colonial treatment by the Indian ruling elite. The mainstream scholars who are disillusioned by the fact that they can solve all the issues on the premise of a nation-state fails to understand that they are not just dealing with a political problem but a Assamese psyche. He seeks a conciliatory approach where both the Indian mindset and the Assamese mindset need to be changed. It is the people who are being tossed between the militant group and the Indian state. The people must not rely on the promise by these insurgent groups of freeing their nation, but should rather ask whether they can sustain it?

Most of the literature from the periphery region seem to ask that why there is so much have and cry over building a nation. *Apurba Baruah's* article begins with this heading, “*Do we need to build the nation*” in *Girin Phukon's* edited book titled as ‘*Politics of identity and nation-building in North-East India*’. (1997) Baruah criticizes the approach of the mainstream Indian political thought which is borrowed from the western political thought, like most of the other developing countries. The problem arises when without understanding the empirical realities of these countries; the theory of nation building seems to be sorted as the only way to tackle the diversities of such countries. Whereas, smaller cultural communities have their own aspirations. Integrating them in the name of common Indian culture

would mean as their loss of identity. He comments that we do not need to build a nation but a strong state where different identities may survive.

The question of building a nation has been raised in this book by several writers as well. *Aparna Mahanta* calls such an artefact of nation-building as pan-Indian patriarchal tendencies to maintain its hegemonic position. *Girin Phukon's* own article throws light on the Assamese chauvinism and identity building among the tribal groups of Assam. *Rulima Kakaty* in her article discusses on language as a factor of identity assertion. The article by *Manorama Sharma*, 'Identity: inherent or evolved?' serve as the foundational argument to all the points discussed by different writers in this book. She theoretically frames that identity is not inherent in communities, it emerges through specific stages of development.

H. K. Barpujari's book "*North-East India: Problems, Policies and Prospects since Independence*" (1998) gives an idea that the linguistic principle on which states were re-organised are unmatched with the conflicting interest within the state. The tribal interest got minimum coverage due to identity crisis of the Assamese community itself. To handle the present turmoil a policy of political dialogue can be considered and a separate approach to deal North-Eastern states should be framed.

Udayon Mishra's article in a book edited by *Kailash S. Agarwal* called '*Dynamics of Identity and Inter-group Relations in North-East India*' depicts the formation of the Assamese community. He studied the growth of the community and then its fragmentation.

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Drawing upon these studies, insights and comments this exercise is to understand and frame coherence among them.

1.07: Significance of the study

The study tries to bring history, psychology, sociology, geography, political science, or even anthropology in a nexus, because the problems discussed originates from all these fields. It is important to the study of politics because a community may be defined from all the above mentioned angle but, the way it is organized is very important. Because here in, lies the question of it's representation.

Stress has been laid on the empirical understanding of facts. There are many studies, which talk of migration, but there are not much which provides an analytical format. The crux and the depth of the problem cannot be understood neither can we relate it to the identity syndrome without the survey of data available on the demographic change.

There are writers who define identity focussing mainly on the nationalistic aspiration. Certain amount of mixing of the idea of identity and subnationalism is allowed but they should not dilute into one. Identity has other aspects, which are equally relevant and highlighted in this study. The study tries to draw a link between, there aspects.

The study focuses on various stages of development in the colonial and postcolonial era. It has been arranged into distinct period to conveniently understand the needs and demands of various stages.

While focussing on the intellectual debate on nation-building and its odds with the subnational paradigm. The aim is not to criticize it but to discuss it and draw a conciliatory approach. The study does not take an adamant approach because there are common areas that can be worked upon.

1.08: Objectives

- To study the historical growth of Assamese identity.
- To analyse the migration trend in Assam both in the pre-independent and post-independent period.
- To briefly characterize the demographic pattern of the Assamese community and how for migration led to its change.
- To look into the politico-social-economic interest generated by different changes and how far these have led to group conflict.
- To test the primordial, developmental approaches and their limitation.
- To work on a debate between nation-state and subnationalism.
- To evaluate on the class interest and its crisis.
- To see how far Assamese subnationalism has led to a feeling of distinctness among other groups of Assam.
- To see whether a gap between Assamese subnationalism and Indian nationalism can be integrated.

1.09: Methodology

It will be an explanatory mode of study relying on the primary and secondary sources such as books, journals and newspapers. It will follow an analytical approach and a methodological survey of data. A similar pattern will be followed throughout, focussing upon the overall trend. These factual trends are re-produced from various sources and not the researcher's own imaginations. Along with an empirical survey a theoretical framework according to the need of the study is applied to develop a better understanding.

1.10: Limitations

Though, this study seeks to be people-oriented and would have given a better viewpoint, if an interview of the common-people could have been conducted. But, the study is unable to include such a quest, due to lack of time. Therefore, the views and analysis of different authors of the region who represent the people have been included to give a mass appeal.

GENESIS OF ASSAMESE IDENTITY: A PRELUDE TO HISTORY

An alternative strategy of looking into the North-East, considering its historical specificities, is yet, to be included within the core of the Indian heartland. Rather, a balance could never be stabilized, where the Indian history could accommodate the history of the North-East region; in particular. We are proceeding with the fact that history has played an important part in crystallising identities of the various sub-groups of India. As, these groups consider their history to be a part of their identity.

Pradip Phanjouban says that the 'history from above' approach which identifies a mainstream nationalism and attempts to fit in all historical events into it, has been unjust to the sub-streams, many of which flowed parallel, and sometimes even in the contrary direction to the mainstream until very recently in the history of the Indian nation.¹

This neglect of the history of sub-streams is not an indication that there were anything peculiarly obscure about these tract, or trivial about their history, but of the prevailing state of historiography in modern India. The logic may very well be extended to the situation in the North-East today.² The patronising nature of the Indian nationalism in historiography largely amounts from its elitist image, ignoring the contributions made by the people on their

¹ Phanjauban, Pradip; "Ethnic Identity and Community Relationship in the Northeast" in Kailash. S. Agarwal (ed); 'Dynamics of Identity and Inter-group relations in North-East India'; Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1999; p. 142.

² *ibid.*, p. 143.

own, independently of the elite, for formation of national consciousness.

To study the nationality question amongst the ethnic communities of the North-East, it is necessary to trace the origin of their growing sense of a 'We consciousness' distinct from the Indian national consciousness. There is a sense of paranoia towards getting absorbed in the larger Indian identity. The gamut of this understanding also extends to Assam; delving into their history we are to seek answers; if any, of their apprehensions. Usually, problem of North-East are dealt generally but each state has its own peculiarities and particularities.

The Assamese history marks the *Ahom*³ rule as the birth of a composite '*Axomiya*' *jati*.⁴ It was the Ahoms who provided a centralised administration and gave the state its present name, Assam⁵. The culture and history of Assam has been shaped by the people from the Indian sub-continent as well as from the far-east. Even, the Assamese intellectuals are proud of the liberal outlook and accommodative power of the Assamese people. If, the culture is so diverse then, what makes Assam today so assertive against any population, which comes from outside its geographical boundary?

The Assamese intellectuals like *Ambikaguri Roychoudhury*,⁶

³ The Ahoms came from upper Burma, had their own language, religion and culture, ruled Assam for six hundred year (1228-1816); but they adopted the Hindu faith and embraced the language and culture of the state.

⁴ Though *jati* in sociology means caste. But *jati* here includes other than Hindu caste groups tribals and Assamese Muslims.

⁵ The word Assam, is a derivative from the word '*Axom*' which means the Ahoms'.

⁶ *Ambikaguri Roy Choudhury* was the founder of Assam Xonrakshini Xobha (later boned into Assam Jatiya Mahasabha). His writings like *Bharatiyar Swarja Aru Assomiyar Swaraj*' (Chetana, 1920) spelt out his views on the position of Assam in an independent India. His '*Songs of the Cell*' written during his days in jail was a call upon the 'million brothers of India', yet he moved away to synthesize regional nationalism with pan-Indian nationalism.

*Jnananath Bora, Chandranath Sharma*⁷ and many others wrote about the need to defend the Assamese homeland against foreign intrusions.

Jnananath Bora's article "*Asom Desh Bharat Barshar Bhiturat Thakiba Kiva?*" (Why should Assam stay in India?) insists that Assam's regeneration would be possible only if it is separated from India.⁸ While *Birinchi Kumar Baruah*⁹ said, that anybody who came to Assam since the British occupation is an alien, and we should save Assam from these foreigners. Thus, a section of the Assamese intellectuals consider Assam's amalgamation into British India was based on trickery and fraud. They are trying to re-interpret, re-create history in order to strengthen their shibboleth that Assam has always been a free nation.

Question has been raised on the validity of the Treaty of Yandabo of 1826¹⁰, which has been signed between the Burmese king and the British East India Company, by virtue of which Assam passed into the British control. Conclusions are drawn that since it was a treaty between two foreign governments; Assam's accession to British India was illegal and its subsequent transfer to India was null and void. It is necessary to look into the background of the signing of the treaty.

⁷ Sharma was the virtual founder of Congress (1920) in Assam. He was known for his radical views.

⁸ Mishra, Udayon; *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*; Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 2000; p.89.

⁹ Baruah; is a well known Assamese literature and later became the Dean of the faculty of Arts of Gauhati University.

¹⁰ Article 2 of the treaty states that king of Ava renounces all claims to the principality of Assam and its dependencies. This has been interpreted by some; as British acceptance of the maintenance of the status quo of the Ahom rule in Assam.

2.01: Assam's Annexation into British India

During the last decade of the eighteenth century, serious disorder gripped the Ahom kingdom. Civil war broke out which culminated into *Moamaria* Revolt.¹¹ It disrupted the social structure based on *paiks*¹² and *khels*.¹³ The Darrang king seeing the advantageous situation intruded, with its army of *burkandazes*.¹⁴ The Ahom king *Gaurinath Singha* made an appeal to the East India Company to send its troops to get rid of *Moamarias* and *Burkandazes*. The British restored the law and order of Assam after defeating the *Moamarias*. But, after the British had left, once again the *Moamarias* rose and the Burmese also invaded the province in 1817 and 1819. This led to de-population and collapse of agriculture and trade.

The Ahom King had to again plead the British for saving Assam. In October 1822, the deposed Ahom king *Purandhar Singha*, petitioned the Governor-General to bring Assam under the 'fostering guardianship' of the British Government 'in the same way as are the Rajahs of Hindustan who benefiting by its aid and support are allowed to conduct the internal affairs of their own

¹¹ The Moamarias were largely peasants, belonging to the Moran tribe of upper Assam. They did not worship idols and refuted Brahmin supremacy. They were against the feudal structure of the Ahom rule, thus broke out into civil wars.

¹² The old revenue system of Assam depended on the work put in for the state in lieu of tax for their cultivable land by every adult male for three to four months in a year. An adult who was registered for state service was called a 'paik', four 'paiks' constituted a 'got'. In times of war and emergencies, the officer in charge of 'khels' mobilized these 'paiks'. It's equivalent to 'masabdari' system of the Moghuls.

¹³ The adult population of Assam were divided into 'Khels' to render specific service to the state such as arrow-making, boat-building, house-building, fighting etc. Each Khel was placed under an officer.

¹⁴ The Burkandazes came from the cashiered soldiers of the Moslem armies. Zamidars also kept them for their own protection. Darrang King Krishnanarayan's army contributed mainly of these soldiers.

countries.¹⁵ Finally when the Burmese started aggression in territories of Bengal, the British declared war on the king of Ava (Burma) on 5th March, 1824. The final defeat of the Burmese was followed by the signing of the 'Treaty of Yandaboo' in 1826, by virtue of which Assam was annexed into the British territory. Though, the treaty was signed between the two foreign governments, as the intellectuals argue, the fact cannot be ignored that Ahom king was also a part of it, he did give a consent to the treaty. Such as, the question of fraudulence does not arise at all.

2.02: Early Stages of the Revolt

The initial years of the company rule was welcomed because it dawned a light of peace after the darkest phase of civil war and Burmese invasions. The British slowly, abolished the old revenue system and introduced the ryotwari system. This created dissatisfaction among the people, who were comfortable with the traditional land use. The Assamese nobility were replaced by the officials from Bengal because, the nobility was totally unprepared to cope with the new system of administration. This led to resentment among them and they staged a revolt against the British. The revolt of *Gomadhar Konwar* and *Roopchand Konwar* (both from Ahom aristocracy) in 1828 and 1829 respectively, failed to stir up a popular support as, the people had lost faith in the nobility. Though, *Peali Barpukhan* (the son of Ahom-Governor of Guwahati), did try to consolidate the plain and hill tribes of Assam against the British. But it took some years for the Assamese peasants to realise their economic subjugation in the British hands.

The transition from semi-tribal, semi-feudal economy, where taxes were paid in kind to payable taxes in cash was not an easy

¹⁵ Mishra, Udayon; op. cit., no. 8; p. 63.

process. The distress of burdened taxation slowly built up fumes, to find expression in revolts like *Phulaguri Dawa*¹⁶ of 1861 and the more organized peasant revolt of 1894 known as the *Battle of Patharughat*.¹⁷

*Maniram Dewan*¹⁸ tried to incept the revolt of 1857 in Assam. In his visit to Calcutta he came to know of the revolt and communicated with *Kondorpeswar Singha*, whom they were preparing to enthrone. But, the revolt was timely suppressed by the British. *Maniram Dewan* and *Peali Baruah* (associate of Maniram) were hanged and, others in the game were transported for life. Slowly, the Assamese common people were rising against the British rule. It is not to say that Maniram's attempt was out of popular support. Here, there is a difference of opinion among historians.

Amalendu Guha says, no doubt the revolt was pro feudal, yet workers, the Assamese villagers, did fraternize with the rebels. *H.K. Barpujari*, however does not share *Guha's* view. He blames the failure of the planned revolt on the lack of unity among the nobility and the indifference of the common people towards the cause espoused by *Maniram Dewan* and his supporters.¹⁹

¹⁶ In September 1861, at Phulaguri (Nowgong district) about fifteen thousand peasants marched to the district town and demanded that the taxes on betel-nut and pan be withdrawn and that no further taxes be levied. People held meetings in which Lieutenant Singer was lynched, several peasant leaders were sentenced to imprisonment.

¹⁷ This incident took place at Patharughat in the Mangaldai sub-division on 28th January 1894. Thousand of people gathered to face the district magistrate of Darrang, because the government was bent on attaching properties of the peasants who refused to pay taxes.

¹⁸ Maniram was made the Dewan of the Assam Company in 1839. In the initial years, he was a strong supporter of British rule, he helped British suppressing the revolts led by Peali Phukan, or Khamtis and Singhphos. Slowly he was deprived from much of his powers. So, he represented the cause of Assamese nobility to regain their status.

¹⁹ Mishra, Udayon; op.cit., no. 8; p. 69.

Whether, the revolt got a popular support or not but, it is not going to far, to admit that *Maniram Dewan* has been an epitome of symbol for the rising nationalist forces. He is seen as the first soldier to fight against colonial exploitation. These heroes of Assam history the martyrs of the Assamese soil are an inspiration, the Assamese draw upon. Even the reactionary group ULFA, in it's armed struggle against the rule of Delhi reminiscences of the struggle of these martyrs, give their remembrance to *Peali Phukan*. The Assamese cannot forget it's glorious past. They proudly claim that, Assam had never been a part of the Mughal empire. The Assamese nationalism sees it as a historical achievement. Names like *Lachit Barphukan* ²⁰ flow in the blood of every Assamese individual.

The history of Assam would be incomplete without studying it's demography, and conditions which altered the social structure and produced factors for the assertion of Assamese identity.

2.03: Consolidation of the Assamese Society

The 'primordalist' approach agree that identity is a given concept inherent in a community. It accepts common descent and culture as the basis for identity formation. But, looking at the demography of the Assamese society, common descent is far from the truth. The Aryanised Hindus, the plain tribals and the Assamese Muslims form the three broad categories of the Assamese society. But, we can say that the Assamese common culture has evolved through a historical process of assimilation, which led to the formation of the Assamese identity.

²⁰ The Mughals invaded Assam 17 times, between 13th and 17th centuries. Lachit Barphukan was the legendary general who defended the Mughal invasion. He slained down his own maternal uncle, who tried to help the Mughals. His slogan 'My maternal uncle is not greater than my country' sends ripples down the spine of every Assamese soul.

Padmanath Gohain Barooah has elaborately explained the social division of the Assamese²¹ as Brahmins, Goswamis (Gosains), Ahoms, Baishyas, Mahanta or Mahajan, Kayasthas, Daibaggyas, Kalita, Keot, Koch, Chutia and Muslims (Morias). The plain tribals like the Mishings and the Bodos, for example, are not mentioned as Assamese.²² There are other historians who would include even the plain tribals.

During the seventeenth century, under the rule of *Rudra Singha* and *Shiva Singha*, many of the plain tribes were assimilated into the Hindu fold, this process was drawn up steadfastly by the Vaishnavite reformer; *Shankardeva* (1449-1568). The plain tribals were brought closer to the Assamese society because of peasant uprising during the British rule.

The Ahoms who gave them positions of power assimilated the Muslim into the Assamese society. They became more Assamese than Muslims and even took active part in resisting Mughal invasion.

The Assamese are very enthusiastic towards forging a unity within itself, narrating the 'glorious past' of the Ahoms, but contradict itself with the Indian culture. The common perception in the 19th and early 20th century about Assamese nationality is that it is limited only to those who lived in the Brahmaputra valley. Writing in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the leading Assamese intellectual of the time, *Gunabiram Baruah* (1837-1892) berates his countrymen for being extremely insular and xenophobic

²¹ The Assamese social fold includes not only the Hindu caste groups but also Ahoms who came from far-east, Keot, Koch, Chutia are the plain tribe, as said to be the original inhabitants, the Hindu-caste groups were mainly brought from northern India and settled in Assam by the Ahom kings. Muslims came in subsequently.

²² Mishra, Udayon; op.cit., no.1; p. 99.

in their attitude towards their hill neighbours as well as the people of Bengal.²³

Writers like, *Udayon Mishra* strongly retains the fact that the 'glorious past' of Assam also includes the pre-Ahom age which is known to have strong cultural links with the rest of Indian sub-continent. Kingdoms like *Bhaskarvarman* were very much part of northern India. The Ahoms strongly supported the Hinduisation of culture. Assam always had strong cultural links both in pre-Ahom and Ahom Assam era.²⁴

However, the two main factors that were instrumental in bringing the different segments of the Assamese society closer was: (a) struggle to regain the status of Assamese language (b) increasing pressure of land as a revolt of immigration. The first was a struggle primarily led by the Assamese middle class. The second one affected both the tribal and non-tribal Assamese peasants facing land alienation. There has always been a middle class-peasant nexus for fostering Assamese nationalism²⁵ The development of Assamese nationalism is a complex and conditional process involving several inter-related facts.

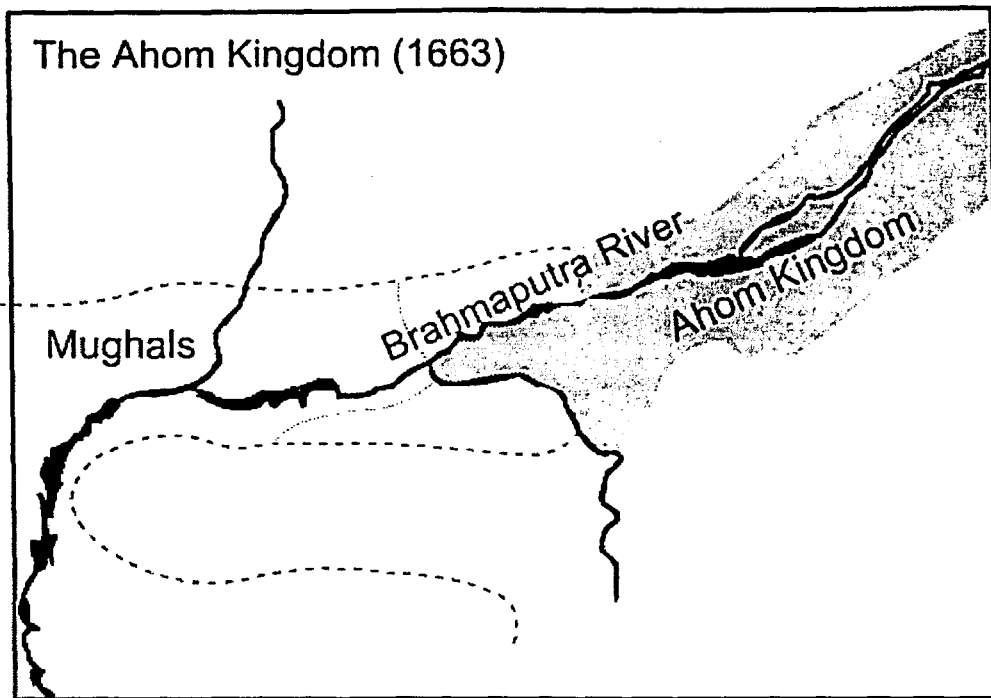
2.04: Territorial Adjustments of the Boundaries of Assam (1826-1947)

Assam, as an administrative unit underwent re-organisation on several occasions. Its fronts receded or expanded depending on

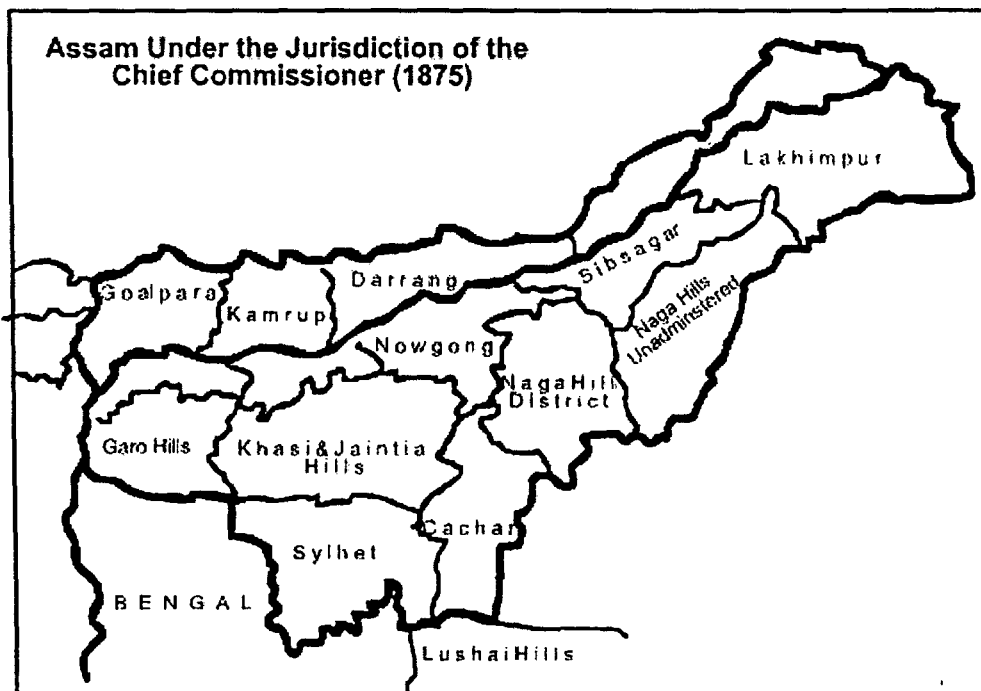
²³ Mishra, Udayon; op.cit. , no.1; p. 100

²⁴ Mishra, Udayon; op.cit., no.8; p. 94.

²⁵ Assamese leaders and writers frequently used the term 'Assamese Nationalism'. In an article one writer maintained. "For the consolidation of India, for the crystallisation of Indian nationalism that is still in the making Assamese nationalism is a factor to be reckoned with. If the British domination is humiliating and demoralising, this Indian domination would be complete annihilation of Assamese nationalism. (See, Giren Phukan, in *Assam's Attitude to Federalism*, 1984, p. 35).



Source: Baruah, Sanjib, 1999.



Source: Baruah, Sanjib, 1999.

Courtesy by Prashant Pastore

the compulsions of time. At times, several components were included within its boundary which were socio-culturally distinct to each other.

Assam was constituted into a Chief Commissioner²⁶ province in 1874, before this, it remained as an appendage to Bengal. At the same time, Sylhet was separated from Bengal and added to Assam i.e. on 12th September, 1874. The Chief Commissioner Assam province included Assam valley and Goalpara, the Garo, Khasi-Jaintia and Naga Hills, Cachar and Sylhet, encompassing an area of 54,100 square miles with a population of 4.15 million. Shillong was its designated capital. The amalgamation of Sylhet with Assam was to mark the start of a new rivalry between the Brahmaputra and Surma/Barak Valleys with Assamese versus Bengali cultural overtones.²⁷

Between 1895 and 1898, the North and the South Lushai Hills and a portion of the Chittagong hill tracts were detached from Bengal and merged with Assam. In 1905 with the partition of Bengal, Assam was merged with East Bengal. The Assamese were reduced to a minority in the new province of 'East Bengal and Assam', and lost their capital to Dhaka. The strong agitation that followed this seeming communal divide compelled restoration of the *status quo ante* in 1912, leading on to Assam's elevation to a Governor's province in 1921. A year later the Lushai Hills-Burma borders were demarcated.²⁸

²⁶ The title of the Chief Commissioner was first used in 1853 when Mr John Lawrence of Punjab was appointed Head of the Executive Government in substitution of the former Board of administration under a President.

²⁷ Varghese, B.G; 'India's North-East Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development, Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi Delhi, 1996; p 27.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 27.

Thus, Assam's territory as a Governor's province comprised of twelve districts with three geographical divisions:

- Brahmaputra valley: Districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.
- Surma valley: Districts of Sylhet and Cachar.
- Hill districts: including Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Lushai and Naga.

If we have a closer look at this reorganisation, the British gave importance only to administrative convenience, the socio-cultural aspect were put at a back seat. The British joined Assam with the districts of Bengal to perpetuate the mal-administration, which Assam suffered from. It also recruited officers from Bengal, because Bengalis were already English-educated, this meant the Bengalis were placed in a domineering positions. Though, the British joined the two valleys and the hill districts of different cultural background, it reflects their policy of divide and rule.

Land-tenure and systems of settlements were different in different parts of Assam. Sylhet and Goalpara had permanent settlements, and ryotwari²⁹ system prevailed in other parts (except the hill districts). Under the Government of India Act, 1919 in continuation with the Scheduled districts Act of 1874, and the Regulations of, 1880, the hill districts were designated as 'backward area', which de-bars application of normal legislation. Later, the Government of India Act, 1935 recognised some as 'Excluded area'³⁰ and some as 'partially excluded area'.

²⁹ The most distinctive feature of ryotwari system was the right to possess land covered by his pattah as long as he regularly paid the revenue. In a word, the government dealt with the ryot directly.

³⁰ The Simon commission recommended the term 'excluded' to the term 'backward'. But 'excluded' has been interpreted as exclusion from British India. Whereas the Commission has explained, that 'excluded' is functional to the protection from economic subjugation by their neighbours; for protection of hill culture. (See, op. cit., no.28, p. 29)

The inclusion of districts of East Bengal into Assam in 1874 opened tracts for population penetration into the region. The Surma valley was three times largely populated than the Brahmaputra valley, (according to 1881 census). Thus, from the late 19th Century to the present times, Assam became a seed-bed for attracting immigration.

2.05: Immigration Characteristics (1826-1947)

There were basically, two phases of immigration during the British rule:

First phase (1826-1905)

During this phase, mainly three, classes of people migrated:

- (a) Tea plantation labourers
- (b) Amolas³¹
- (c) Merchants and tradesmen from Rajasthan and Bengal.

The en-routes to the settlement of the new population of Assam were characterised by politico-economic reasons.

The tea-plantation labourer came due to shortage of labour-supply after tea-industry was established in Assam (1855). The first batch of 400 labourers reached Cachar in 1858-59 from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The process of importation was accelerated after 1860. In 1863, an act was passed to regulate emigration. Again in 1901 the Assam Labour Emigration Act was passed.³² There were 654,000 labourers in tea gardens (including the Sylhet district) in 1901. This was about one-tenth of the total population of Assam.

³¹ 'Amolas' were office employees from Sylhet, Dacca, Mymensingha, Rangpur and other district of Bengal (presently Bangladesh).

³² Gupta, S.K. and Gupta, I.B; 'Conflict and Communication: Mass Upsurge in Assam, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1990; p. 21.

Between 1911 and 1920, about 769,000 labourers were imported into the state and in the next decade, 1921-30, an additional 169,000 were brought in. This process of mass importation of tea garden labourers slowed down after 1931.³³

The Amolas were Bengali Hindus who migrated to serve as company officials because the British found the noble class of the Ahoms were unsuitable to manage the administration. As recorded in the *Political History of Assam, vol. I*, Scott³⁴ found, to his “utter disappointment” that his “men of rank proved themselves wholly incompetent to discharge the duties of revenue and judicial department entrusted to them... the local authorities had no other alternative but to resort to employment, in lieu of ‘men of rank’, of ‘men of ability and business’, mostly from neighbouring districts of Bengal, lest they had to relinquish all hope of realising government dues.”³⁵

With the discovery of upper Assam coalfields in 1833, railways and streamlines were introduced. This opened the tracks for merchant and tradesman (especially from Rajasthan and Bengal) to explore the attractive opportunities of trading services.

Though, towards the end of the nineteenth century a few rich Assamese had become tea-planters. But overall they failed to reap the prospects of the expanding economy. Firstly, the Assamese lacked enterprising skill and secondly, lacked infrastructure, to adopt to these new advantages.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁴ In April 1826, a kind of dyarchy was brought into existence. Mr David Scott was appointed as the political agent. He was responsible for the collection of revenues.

³⁵ Gupta, Shekhar; ‘Assam: A Valley Divided’; Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 1984; p. 100.

In the earlier period, the Assamese were quite sympathetic to the idea of migration. They were aware of the fact that large areas were lying as wastelands. Assam had experienced de-population due to Moamaria wars, and natural calamities in the earlier century, so it needed to be re-settled.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-1858), a leading personality of the Assamese society, during the middle of the nineteenth century submitted a memorandum to A.J.M. Mills. He pleaded that the people from Bengal could be invited to immigrate as a means of improving population of Assam. *Gunabiram Barua*,³⁶ a member of Assamese gentry, even estimated that no less than a million people could easily be settled from out side on the wastelands of Assam.³⁷

Among all the three classes of population that migrated, the Assamese perceived threat to their identity and culture only from the Bengali population. The tea plantation labourers assimilated well in the Assamese culture, and they were called 'model migrants'. The Assamese also did not perceive any threat from the tradesman community, as they were not much interested in trading. It was the Bengalis, who dominated the services offered by the British, which were highly desirable to the Assamese. The Assamese middle class faced stiff competition from the Bengali population. This animosity also revolves around the fact that

³⁶ Gunabiram Barua, enumerated three factors which were favourable to the immigration i.e. (i) cheapness and fertility of land (ii) attractive earnings for skilled labour and craftsman in view of local manpower shortage and (iii) the prevailing conditions of easy matrimony into local families (see, op. cit., no. 26, p. 37).

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 11.

Bengalis, who were culturally developed, preferred to remain as Bengali, rather than adopt Assamese language.

The Bengali had already convinced the British that Assamese, was a mere dialect of Bengali and so, Bengali language substituted Assamese language as the language in courts and as medium of instruction in educational institutions. Although, in the memorandum (1853), submitted by *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan*, there was plead for recognition of Assamese language but, did not mean to abolish Bengali altogether. But, the expansionist claims of Bengali chauvinism made the Assamese increasingly conscious of establishing their language on a sound footing . It, took four decade until, in 1880, Assamese was again used in the level of primary school and it took another half a century to restore it in the level of high school. The articles in newspapers and journals like the *Orunodai* (it was i.e. missionary run newspaper by the American Baptist Mission) The *Asam Bilasini*, the *Bijuli*, the *Jonaki* expressed their dissatisfaction over the status of Assamese language and tried to generate new consciousness among the Assamese. Organisation like *Axomiya Bhaxa Unnati Xadhini Xobha* (1888) which was established by the Assamese students in Calcutta gave a platform to the importance of Assamese language. The impact of new ideas during the period of expanding economy had stirred up in the Assamese elites, a feeling of Assamese nationalism.

The migration process led to the growth of population³⁸, which was further intensified in the 20th century with the migration of Mymensinghas³⁹.

Second phase (1905-1947)

This phase saw the coming of Muslim (Bengali) peasants in large number. Bengali Hindus who were the service class inhabited the towns whereas, Muslim Bengalis were the peasant class, so they inhabited the rural areas. The spurt of Muslim migration was a political ploy.

The idea was first mooted in 1906 when at the invitation of *Nawab Salim Ulah Khan* of Dhaka, some prominent Muslims of India had gathered at Dhaka to deliberate over the formation of the Muslim League as suggested by then viceroy *Lord Curzon* to a Muslim delegation which had met him earlier at Shimla. At a public meeting held at that time, *Nawab Salim Ulah Khan* exhorted the Muslims to migrate to Assam and settle there.⁴⁰

The trends of population influx to the Assam was quite evident from the decadal variation in the population growth.(Table 1)

³⁸ In 1981, the non-indigenous population of the Assam valley was estimated at 0.5 to 0.6 million in a total population of 2.2 million. (See, Amiya Kumar Das, in 'Assam's Agony, 1982; p. 26).

³⁹ Mymensinghas were Muslim peasants from the overpopulated East Bengal districts (mainly from Mymensing and Sylhet). These immigrants Muslims decided that for peaceful co-existence, till they can achieve the political strength, it was better to learn Assamese to appease the indigenous crowd. They were called 'noa Axomiya' (New Assamese).

⁴⁰ Singh, Manju; 'Assam: Politics of Migration & Quest for Identity', Anita Publications, Jaipur, 1990; pp. 57-58.

Table 2.1: District wise Decadal Variation in Population (1901-1951)

District	Years	1901- 11	1911 - 21	1921 - 31	1931 - 41	1941 -51
Assam	T*	+16.84	+20.19	+20.25	+20.45	+20.12
	R	+16.75	+19.79	+19.84	+20.22	+18.58
	U	+20.55	+36.80	+27.58	+28.30	+89.07
Goalpara	T	+29.9	+26.9	+15.7	+14.8	+9.25
	R	+30.2	+26.5	+15.5	+14.6	+8.04
	U	+17.4	+46.3	+24.4	+22.53	+54.6
Kamrup	T	+13.3	+14.2	+27.9	+29.4	+17.89
	R	+13.3	+13.5	+27.9	+28.9	+17.18
	U	+13.7	+33.2	+26.1	+41.8	+33.5
Darrang	T	+11.8	+27.6	+22.68	+26.0	+24.2
	R	+11.9	+27.2	+22.32	+26.2	+23.5
	U	+5.6	+56.1	+43.0	+16.7	+60.6
Sibsagar	T	+15.5	+19.0	+13.3	+11.4	+16.5
	R	+15.0	+19.1	+13.0	+11.2	+15.8
	U	+44.1	+15.3	+27.0	+21.3	+39.7
Lakhimpur	T	+26.3	+34.0	+23.9	+22.70	+17.9
	R	+26.2	+32.7	+23.8	+22.8	+16.2
	U	+29.7	+77.2	+25.1	+19.4	+59.4
Nowgong	T	+15.8	+31.9	+41.3	+15.3	+36.6
	R	+15.7	+31.1	+41.3	+15.1	+33.4
	U	+27.6	+75.5	+41.6	+24.6	+158.5
Mikirhill Distric	T	-	-	-	-	+30.9
	U	-	-	-	-	+30.9
North Cachar	T	-33.1	+5.9	+13.6	+13.7	+6.1
	R	33.1	+5.9	+13.6	+9.2	+4.4
	U	-	-	-	-	+47.4
Cachar District	T	+13.2	+5.3	+6.9	+11.4	+24.6
	R	+13.2	+5.4	+6.6	+10.8	+21.4
	U	+12.11	+1.3	+22.2	+32.4	+23.2

Figures in percentage

* T – Total R - Rural U-Urban

Source: Gupta, S.K. and Gupta, 1990; pp.38-39.

The decade 1901-11, were the decade of the division of Bengal (1905), and the merger of Assam with East Bengal. Thus, Assam faced remarkable population change. The population growth rate was highest in Goalpara district, 29.9 per cent followed by Lakhimpur, at 26.3 percent. The urban population growth rate was

remarkably high in Sibsagar, at 44.1 percent. North Cachar, was the only district, which experienced negative growth rate.

During the decade, 1911-21, the highest population growth rate was in Lakhimpur, 34 percent, followed by Nowgong, 31.9 percent, then followed by Darrang, 27.6 per cent. Goalpara was pushed to the fourth position. This indicate that, the East Bengali cultivators were shifting to other districts besides Goalpara. Lakhimpur district recorded abnormal growth in urban population, 77.2 per cent from 29.7 percent in 1901-11. This can be a indication of high urban in-migration.

Between 1921-31, the two districts Nowgong and Kamrup experienced high growth rate, followed by Kamrup, Lakhimpur and Goalpara. The population trend shows that the migrants first settled in the char areas of the Goalpara district, and subsequently moved to other districts. During 1931-41, the districts of Kamrup came on top, followed by Darrang and Lakhimpur.

During 1941-51, all the districts of Assam registered considerable increase in their population except Goalpara district, which recorded a growth rate of only 9.25 percent. This small increase in the Goalpara district according to 1971 Census was "probably due to the repercussion of communal riots in the then East Pakistan, which affected Goalpara and Kamrup districts". The Cachar district where the population increase was less than 14 percent upto 1941 suddenly registered an increase of 24.6 per cent between 1941 to 1951 which is mainly attributed due to influx of Hindu refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan.⁴¹ The data does not include the hill districts, which are presently not within the state of Assam.

⁴¹ Gupta, S.K and Gupta, I.B; op.cit., no. 33; p 40.

Table 2.2: Hindu, Muslim and Christian Population in Various Districts of Assam (1911-1951)

District	1911		1931		1951		Christian		
	H*	M**	H	M	H	M	1911	1931	1951
Goalpara	55.68	35.19	43.69	43.89	51.54	42.94	0.87	2.10	2.80
Kamrup	68.68	9.66	72.69	24.61	69.74	29.29	0.38	0.57	0.74
Darrano	65.19	5.39	77.93	11.46	78.65	17.03	0.51	2.72	4.03
Nowgong	58.94	5.20	57.90	31.60	58.40	40.54	0.46	0.90	0.54
Sibsagar	86.10	4.30	90.11	4.70	92.03	5.82	0.78	1.42	1.75
Dibrugarh	84.34	3.05	88.22	3.57	91.70	3.25	1.07	2.04	3.21
Lakhimpur	61.44	2.31	88.82	3.04	87.27	8.63	0.89	1.75	3.04
Karbi Anglong	NA	NA	NA	NA	67.40	0.03	NA	NA	3.94
North Cachar Hills	55.21	1.62	77.57	1.37	76.33	0.59	0.23	6.00	15.30
Cachar	60.87	37.60	58.87	40.06	60.64	38.49	0.21	0.42	0.75
Assam	68.33	16.23	70.29	22.78	72.01	24.68	0.59	1.42	2.00

Figures in percentage

* Hindu ** Muslim

Source: Gupta, S.K. and Gupta, I.B, 1990; p.45.

The data above shows that Sibsaagar and Dibrugarh had been predominately Hindu districts. In 1911, Goalpara had a comparatively high Muslim population of 35.19 per cent, than other districts; except, Cachar, which always had a high Muslim population. During this period Goalpara also registered the highest population growth rate (table 1). This attributes to the immigration of the Muslim peasants to the 'char' areas were good cultivable land were available.

The year 1931 shows that the Muslim population increased sharply in Kamrup, Darrang and Nawgong. These districts also had high growth rate in the same period, (1911-1931).

In 1951, Goalpara district's Muslim population decreased a little, 42.14 per cent from 43.89 per cent in 1931, which is due to riots after partition.

Another district, which had high growth rate, was Lakhimpur (table 1), but it has high Hindu population. Although Hindu's also migrated but did not contribute to large changes in population upto partition like Muslims who came in large batches.

The North-Cachar Hills and Karbi Anlong districts are the only two districts where Christians occupy second position, after the Hindus. It is only in the North Cachar Hills, which shows sharp rise of Christian population from 6 per cent in 1931 to 15.30 in 1951. This can be attributed to the influence of missionaries in the hilly areas.

Table 2.3: Distribution of Speakers of Assamese, Bengali and Hindi (1911 - 1951)

District	1911			1921			1931			1951		
	A*	B**	H***	A	B	H	A	B	H	A	B	H
Assam	35.31	26.90	7.40	33.43	27.60	6.94	32.32	27.56	7.84	56.29	19.64	3.79
Goalpara	14.24	57.90	3.67	18.20	53.21	3.22	18.26	53.97	2.80	62.00	17.45	2.58
Kamrup	79.23	1.27	1.87	75.46	6.66	2.20	66.50	17.45	1.94	79.01	15.11	1.66
Darrang	44.37	15.41	5.71	36.59	18.04	7.28	32.85	16.20	8.63	71.35	6.95	3.33
Lakimpur	33.79	16.29	18.67	29.83	16.89	12.49	30.44	10.11	17.44	64.06	7.63	5.4
Nowgong	64.44	4.19	5.72	52.94	18.12	5.64	42.20	34.37	5.33	69.09	23.37	2.69
Sibsagar	56.73	18.52	6.27	52.31	15.96	7.40	53.96	7.86	11.17	84.44	3.39	3.00
Cachar	0.21	69.60	15.05	0.27	70.29	24.32	0.28	70.22	13.58	0.31	77.14	10.46
United Mikir and North Cachar Hills	0.29	57.84	20.34	0.39	59.52	19.16	0.39	59.38	18.19	3.50	4.37	1.67

Figures in percentage

* Assamese ** Bengali *** Hindi

Source: Gupta, S.K and Gupta. I., 1990; p. 49.

If we see above table, which shows Goalpara, Cachar and United Mikir with North Cachar Hills had a high percentage of Bengali speakers. But, it is only Cachar which continues to be Bengali dominated region, after 1931.

In Goalpara district, the Bengali speaking population came down from 53.97 per cent in 1931 to 17.45 per cent in 1951. The district of Kamrup registered increase in the Bengali speaking population in the year of 1931, it rose to 17.45 per cent from 1.27 per cent in 1901, it again declined to 15.11 per cent in 1951. The district of Nowgong also experienced the same phenomenon like Kamrup.

Darrang and Lakhimpur had a rise in the Bengali speaking population upto 1921, after which it declined. In the Sibsagar district. Bengali population had been throughout declining, from 18.52 per cent, in 1911, it stood at 3.34 per cent in 1951. The United Mikir and North Cachar Hills had almost steady population of Bengali speakers upto 1931, nearly 60 per cent. After which, it had a steep fall and stood at 4.37 per cent in 1951. It shows after 1931, only small percentage of the population except Cachar district gave Bengali as their mother-tongue.

Sibsagar, Kamrup and Nowgong always had more than 50 per cent of Assamese speakers except for a brief period in Nowgon (1931). After 1931, the numbers of Assamese loomed large. Lakhimpur is the only district which has Hindi speaking population at second position, both in 1911 and 1931.

After 1931, there has been considerable decrease in Bengali speaking population in most of the districts. This happened because of a tacit understanding that migrant Bengali Muslim, keen on improving their economic lot, appeared to have reached with the

indigenous Assamese a tacit understanding on the language issue. Being interested in getting land in the fertile valley and by offering his labour cheap in the struggle for survival the immigrant put their love of language on the shelf and declared Assamese as their mother-tongue⁴² (see table4).

Table 2. 4: Population Variation of Different Linguistic Groups of Assam (1911-51)

Sub-period	Language	1911		1931		Variation in percentage of total	Variation in number of speakers (in percent)
		Speakers (lakhs)	Percentage of total	Speakers (lakhs)	Percentage of total		
1911-31	Hindi	2.35	6.11	4.24	7.62	+1.51	+80.43
	Bengali	17.58	45.67	14.90	26.79	-18.88	-15.24
	Assamese	8.35	21.69	17.47	31.42	+9.73	+109.22
	Others	10.21	26.53	19.0	34.17	+7.64	+86.09
	Total	38.49		55.61			+44.48
1931-51		1931		1951			
	Hindi	4.24	7.62	3.07	3.82	-3.80	-27.59
	Bengali	14.90	26.79	13.25	16.50	-10.29	-11.07
	Assamese	17.47	31.42	45.52	56.69	25.27	+160.56
	Others	19.00	34.17	18.45	22.99	-11.18	-2.89
	Total	55.61		80.29			+44.38

Source: Chhabra, K.M.L, 1992; p.17.

The above tables shows that, Bengali speakers held the highest percentage in 1911 (45.67), which declined to 16.50 in 1951, whereas number of Assamese speakers increased upto 56.69 per cent in 1951 from 21.69 per cent in 1911. The variation in the number of the Assamese speaking people reached 109.22 per cent in 1931 and increased to 160.56 per cent in 1951. While both in Bengali and Hindi, speaking population shows negative trend in their growth.

⁴² Chhabra, K.M.L; 'Assam challenge'; Konark Publishers Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 1992; p.16.

Mr. Vaghaiwala, the Census Superintendent (1951), analysed this phenomenon of rise in the number of Assamese speakers, he said, "with the solitary exception of Assamese every single language or language group shows a decline. All this decline has gone to swell the percentage of people speaking Assamese in 1951 the figures do not fail to reflect the aggressive linguistic nationalism now prevailing in Assam coupled with the desire of many persons among them as well as tea garden labour immigrants to adopt Assamese as their mother-tongue in the state of their adoption..."⁴³

It was not because of assimilation but a conspiracy to flatter the Assamese. The Bengali Muslims under political patronage, secured land in guise of accepting Assamese language. Whereas, Bengali Hindus were competent with the Assamese and would never declare Assamese as their mother-tongue.

2.06: The Politics of the Muslim League: 'Grow more Muslims'

The British introduced the line system in 1916⁴⁴, as a means mainly to avoid conflicts between the indigenous and migrant population. But, The Premier *Sir Saadullah* of the Muslim league ministry of Assam, implemented its first colonisation scheme⁴⁵ in the district on Nowgon in 1928. It tried to rather abolish the line system. Under the unfortunate colonisation scheme 47, 636 acres of land were allotted to 1,619 Muslim and 441 Hindu immigrants of

⁴³ Chabbera, K.M.L; op. cit., no. 44; p. 18.

⁴⁴ In 1916, the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong suggested the 'line system'. On the basis of which specified areas were divided into Immigrants line, where land would be allotted to immigrants only; Mixed line, both immigrants and indigenous people could settle here, Assamese line, only indigenous people could take land here.

⁴⁵ Under this scheme of 1928, a family was given 20 Bighas of land on payment of Rs. 25.00 per Bigha, in 1935, the premium was reduced to Rs. 10.00 to be paid in installments by the immigrants.

East Bengal till March 1933⁴⁶. The Assamese pressurized the government for strict implementation of line system, but Muslim league was against it. *Hockenull* committee was set up to review the system. The committee found, in Barpeta sub-division alone, the percentage of Muslims shot up from 0.1 per cent to 49 per cent between 1911 and 1938.

To encourage more Muslim migration, Sir Saadullah, conceived “grow more food” Plan in 1940. According to him, Muslim come basically for jute cultivation and so that, khas lands under this programme can be brought under cultivation by getting cultivator’s from East Bengal, thus abolishing the line system. At this tactical gestures from the Muslim League Ministry, *Lord Wavell*, the Viceroy of India gave very undignified remarks “...the chief political problem is the desire of Muslim Ministers in Assam to increase the immigration into uncultivable government land in Assam under the slogan “Grow More Food” but what really is ‘Grow More Muslims’”.⁴⁷ In the Muslim political circle leaders like Maulana Blasani was espousing the cause of the immigrate Muslim peasant.

C.S. Mullan, the census Commissioner (1931), remarked on the flow of immigrant as, a phenomenon which is likely to alter the future of Assam and “...it is sad but by no means improbable that in another thirty years Sibargar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home....”⁴⁸ Such remarks naturally frightened the Assamese elite. According to *Amalendu Guha*, the Mymensinghas could never win the Assamese faith. Though, they tried to adopt Assamese culture.

⁴⁶ Singh, Manju; op. cit., no. 42; p. 66.

⁴⁷ Singh, Manju; op. cit., no. 42; p. 70.

⁴⁸ Phukan, Girin; op. cit., no. 51; p. 9.

Guha accuses *Mullan* as an irresponsible European civil servant who instigated a hate campaign against the immigrants, and tried to forecast the future. But, it cannot be denied that whatever the British intention, there has been a systematic Muslim League effort to alter the population structure of Assam. The Mymensinghas adopted Assamese language for seeking their own benefit and not because of their love for Assamese language. Even the indigenous Assam's Muslims who were initially backing the immigration, to raise their numbers, withdrew their stand. But, the problem got a linguistic overtone more than communal. The Assamese felt threatened of being reduced to a minority, by Bengali Muslims, but more than the word Muslim, Bengali struck hard on their face. The Assamese dislike for Bengali is as old as their relationship, and it is not to deny that, Bengali chauvinism was a major barrier to develop a cordial relation.

2.07: The Beginnings of Assamese Subnationalism: 'Assam for Assamese'

Eminent Assamese personalities like *Ambikaguri Roy Chowdhury* formed the *Assmiya Pratirakshini Sabha* (society for the preservation of the Assamese) in 1926. The Sabha put up a strong case of "Assam for Assamese". It also emphasized the fact that the "Swaraj" for India must also mean 'Swaraj' for each component unit like Assam, endowing her with full freedom to preserve and protect her "individuality in respect of language and culture".⁴⁹ This shows that the Assamese became increasingly conscious of their identity. The formation of the 'Assam Association' in 1903, was a result of this kind of consciousness. It acted as a mouth piece for

⁴⁹ Phukan, Girin; 'Assam's Attitude to Federalism'; Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1984; p.4.

the westernized Assamese elite in articulating their needs and grievances. Thus, the 20th century saw the formation of various organisation and associations, like *Axom Chattra Xonmilan* (Assam Student's Conference), in 1916 and *Axom Sahitya Xobha*, in 1917. The, *Axom Sahitya Xobha* (a literary and cultural organisation), laid stress on the entity of Assamese culture, separate and independent. Various newspapers and periodicals contributed to the growth of sub-nationalist sentiment. *Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's*⁵⁰ , 'A few Remarks on the Assamese language' affirmed the separate identity of the Assamese language against the Bengali's. It is revered as a historic document of the Assamese language movements in the post-colonial period. The Assamese middle class, took inspiration from him in the later period.

The rise of Assamese middle class could be found way back in the 19th century in the ryot xobhas⁵¹. Though, the Assamese middle class was a product of the British rule but could hardly cope with the Bengali gentry. As Broomfield points out in his 'Elite Conflict in a Plural society', the Bengali middle class had already produced a big surplus of educated youths who could not hope to be employed in the generally narrow provincial administrative set-up. They sought their fortunes in neighbouring states of Orissa, Bihar and Assam, where their assertion of cultural superiority exacerbated local resentment at their success in finding jobs.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan (1829-1858) belonged to a well know enterprising family founded by a wandering monk from south India. He went to Calcutta for higher studies, and later joined the government service. Though, earlier he was sympathetic to immigrants, but later seeing the Bengali chauvinism felt betrayed and espoused the cause of Assamese nationalism.

⁵¹ Ryot Xobhas were middle class led peasant organisations, which were very closely associated with Raj Mels (the people assemblies), which took part in various peasant struggle of the nineteenth century.

⁵² Gohain, Hirendra Nath; 'Assam: A Burning Question'; Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1985; p. 81

The marginalisation of the Assamese middle class was not only due to British preference for Bengali officials, but also due to the demographic changes that were taking place. It was only after the first World War that a distinct national consciousness backed up by political organisation, began to take shape for establishing the legitimate status of the Assamese language.

The Assamese people tried to find solace in the regional brand of nationalism, more than pan-Indian nationalism. The poems of *Lakshminath Bezbaroa's*, '*Mor Desh*' and '*Assam Sangeet*' (1910), picturize the beauty of the Assamese montherland. Today, '*Mor Desh*' is the *Jatiya Sangeet*, which is sung along with the National Anthem. Bezbaroa's writings, demonstrate that Assamese linguistic nationalism was part of the broader Indian nationalism, yet Axom Desh is an autonomous socio-cultural and political entity. Hence, the struggle between the two kinds of nationalism forms an important part in Assam's history.

The feeling of Indian nationalism was strengthened with the birth of Congress in Assam (1921). Rather, Congress found a strong entry when the Muslim political game for increasing the Muslim population in Assam threatened the Assamese. Like the rest of India, Assam Politics was a contest between pro-Hindu Congress and Muslim League.

The Assamese did take part in the various movements for the national cause. But, on the eve of independence, according to the grouping scheme of the Cabinet Mission Plan⁵³, Assam was clubbed with East Bengal, it started losing faith in the Indian Congress. All

⁵³ Under the Cabinet Mission Plan, India was divided into A, B and C sub-federation. Section 'C' was to consist of Assam and East-Bengal. The number of constituent members representing Assam was just 10, in contrast 60 from Bengal.

fear and anxieties of the Assamese elite came to reality. It meant not only the loss of Assam to the new state of Pakistan, but the most immediate worry was they would be finally placed under total Bengali domination. The Assam Congress staged *Satyagraha*. *Gopinath Bordoloi* met *Gandhiji*, appealing him to backout if the Congress decided to accept the grouping plan. But *Jawaharlal Nehru* was not very sympathetic to their issue. Even *Sardar Patel*, who is otherwise know for his strong mind said that India cannot be plunged to civil war for the sake of Assam. Thus, All India Congress Committee accepted the British statement of the Cabinet Mission Plan, by 522-99 votes.

Hundreds of public meetings were held in Assam, the newspapers flashed it a question of life and death of Assam. Though, the Muslim League was almost striving for success, in their plan to increase the Muslim numbers and finally include Assam into Pakistan. But with *Gandhiji's* intervention, Assam was excluded from the grouping scheme. Only sylhet district of Assam was lost to Pakistan by a referendum of 55,000 votes in favour of Pakistan. *Bordolai*, won the battle for Assam.

But, the incident left an imprint in the Assamese mind that it can not rely much on the Centre. Assam took a strong stand on the question of 'federalism' in the Constituent Assembly. Assam asked for strong implementation of Constitutional safeguard for protection against any threat to the Assamese existence.

2.08: Conclusion

The history of Assam has been a confluence of different cultural streams. This accommodation was peaceful and acceptable until the advent of the British. The British rule brought changes to it's social fabric but, was rather a boon in disguise. Because, these

changes has stimulated the process of consolidation of the Assamese society. And developed a consciousness of language and cultural identity.

The unmindful policies of the British, the Bengali chauvinism and the Muslim League's tactful measures exasperated the Assamese of their dominated status. Initially, the Assamese gave the migration process a welcoming gesture. But, when their ability for administration was suspected and the Assamese language was replaced with Bengali language, the Assamese middle class stood against intrusion of the outsiders into their land.

The apprehension towards the Bengali community grew because, they occupied a considerable part of the demography. Whereas; the trend of population growth-rate shows a different picture. There is a decrease of the Bengali population and increase of only the Muslims. This phenomenon is associated with the fact that, to secure economic advantage, the Bengali Muslims had put aside their cultural identity of language. However, the issue of migration came to be entangled with the question of language rather than religion. Mainly, because the Assamese faced stiff economic competition from the Bengalis.

The Assamese middle class tried to permeate the Assamese society with the social value of 'land' and 'language'. The cultural manifestation of identity along with territorial identification of homeland inculcated the feeling of nationalism. Against the backdrop of India's freedom struggle, the idea of independence also gained momentum in Assam. But, the clause of freedom to the Assamese was meant to be incomplete without the protection of their language from the Bengali domination. Under the pretext of 'Assam for Assamese' a particularistic sentiment germinated among

the Assamese elites. It further exploded when Assam was left all alone to protect itself from its inclusion into Pakistan at the eve of independence.

The threat of being minority in its own land intensified with India's partition and increase of migration. Moreover, the tribal clause in the 1941 census separated the tribal community from the Assamese, which meant further decline in the Assamese population. Thus, an unflinching struggle continues in the post-independence era, for the protection of their identity. The Assamese demands were left unheard in the national circle, which raised doubts whether the Indian nation can ever commit itself to the cause of Assam.

Stress was laid on the objective of building the Indian nation and cry of such small segments like the Asamese was given a backseat. The common notion seem to be that these aspiration will take its own course of fulfilment once India accomplishes the process of nation building. Whereas, the Assamese elites were keen on implementing strong measures of constitutional guarantee of their rights and protection. But, the problems of the pre-independence era could not be solved rather continued in the post independence era, which deepened their identity consciousness. With the growth of political awareness the common people also became conscious of their language status, which ultimately found its expression in the mass movements, from what was before a literary expression of the Assamese elite.

**Multi-Faceted Dimensions of Nation-State and Subnationalism:
The Post-Independence Period**

Our freedom, enlightenment to the rule of our people, has been at the cost of many martyrs at the altar of our motherland, India. We could achieve a rule for ourselves but, the most difficult task left is to integrate the rule, which does not simply, means political coherence, but a psychological make-up to feel the adherence which could never be accomplished.

Right from the time of independence or even during our freedom struggle we have been voraciously contemplating that the cynosure in our agenda is 'nation-building'. This is how India, as a multi-ethnic state can stay together. 'Nation-building' as an idea was fermented to toll away the inadequacy that the West had shown to the newly independent post-colonial countries. The West argued that no modern state can survive without becoming a nation. The imperialist forces and particularly their ideologues were harping that, governing these colonial countries were the white man's burden, because left on their own, the subjects of these countries cannot rule themselves. Even then, when these countries began to gain independence the west pressurized that the success to their governance lies in becoming 'nation-states'.¹

¹ The nation-state is a form of political organisation and a political ideal. As a political organisation, it is an autonomous political community bounded by bonds of citizenship and nationality. As a political principle it is reflected in Mazzini's words 'Every nation a state, only one state for the entire nation'. The majority of modern state claim to be nation-state but in practice, it is an ideal and never existed in perfect form because no state is culturally homogenous because, the strength of nation-state lies in cultural cohesion along with political unit. (See, Andrew Heywood, 'Key Concepts in Politics', Macmillan Press Ltd, London, 2000, p.252).

Authors like *Karl Deutsch, Gabriel Almond, Charles Tilly* have developed theories of nation-building which look at it as a process of social mobilisation in terms of urbanisation, education and industrialisation. But these theories seem to ignore certain vital relationships in the empirical reality of the developing countries such as the impact of land reforms on agricultural development and connections of developing economies with international economies.² The other approach is professed by scholars like *S.N. Eisenstadt, Edward Shils, Reinhard Benedix and Rajni Kothari* who, study nation-building in terms of Centre formation and peripheral response. But, the loophole that ply both the theories is that, they fail to explain the variation of experiences in specific societies of the third world countries.

Nevertheless, this has not distracted the social scientist from examining the process of nation building in India. *Rajni Kothari, Rasheeduddin Khon, Iqbal Narain, M. N. Srinivas, T.K. Oomen, Shanti Swarop* have accepted the western doctrine that States have to be Nation-State so, India must become one nation. Infact, 'one nationality - one state' ideal had led to the emergence of most of the nation-states in Europe. Subsequently, there are emergence of these independent states of Asia and Africa with multi-ethnic population who, were also trying to forge themselves as nation. *Glazar* points that as each state tries to become a nation it attempts to reduce the intensity of subordinate ethnic claims³. The solution that writers like *M.N. Srinivas* finds for

² Baruah, A.K; "Do we need to build a nation?" in Girin Phukan (ed.), 'Politics of Identity and Nation-Building in North-East India; South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1997; p.26.

³ Dutta, Birendranath; "Ethnicity, Nationalism and Sub-Nationalism: With Special Reference to North-East India" in B. Phakem (ed.); Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity', Omsons Publications, Guwahati, 1990; p.37.

such a diverse country like India is that, they subscribe to such basic ideas as the continuance and strengthening of India as a single political entity with parliamentary democracy, federation and secularism as its chief characteristics and the abolition of poverty and the reduction of inequalities between different groups and sections as central aim.⁴ *Rajni Kothari* explains that the process of nation-building can be seen in terms of single administrative process and institutional building aiming at uniformity and co-ordination in a planned effort. The argument inherent in this perspective is that to develop an Indian national identity we must have common political goals. And, nationalism became the major ideology through which such a national identity was to be maintained.

Nationalism, in the modern sense of the term with exclusive political identity started developing under the British domination. Thereby, we have been overlooking the language-cultural identity that have played a significant role in the socio-politico development in the sub-continent. Rather, throughout the history of Indian civilisation, the content of Indian identity has been spiritual and cultural rather than being political. Whereas, social scientists like *Rajni Kothari* seem to be more emphasising on political aspects and have let the cultural aspects to remain clouded. He perceives 'nation' as, "the crystallisation of a dominant political centre in the midst of plural identities and segmented distances that had characterized Indian civilisation for centuries." He argued that this centre was established only with the emergence of an all India elite in the colonial period. He is of the

⁴ Baruah, A.K.; op. cit, no. 2; p.27.

opinion that this elite had created a nation wide organisation with a "membership that encompassed segmental differentiation of all kinds".⁵

They accept that the ultimate destiny of India lies in the merger of different communities into a single nation. Which applied to cultural context, would mean nation-building in India is seasoned with the existence of a common Indian culture. But, there is a huge debate on the meaning of the term 'commonness' whether it is synonymous with 'oneness'.

3.01: Subnationalism Discourses and Regionalism

Thus, there is another stream of thought which stresses on this fact that even before independence, many of the small communities has acquired the consciousness of their distinctness from the larger Indian consciousness. The independence struggle saw the birth of regional middle classes, which did accept the ideology of Indian nationalism but never forgot their identities. Scholars like *Nihar Ranjan Roy* maintained that, we should not forget that India consisted of a number of smaller territorial units, each inhabited by human communities characterized by mutually inter-dependent but functionally distinguishable cultural forms with personalities of their own . . . that the dominant political and intellectual trends in India view India as a nation-state and define Indian nationalism in terms of 'Hindu-Hindi-Brahminical tradition'.⁶ Therefore, thinkers like him, oppose the proponents of nation-state who just talk of unity in diversity and propagate the theory of melting pot.⁷

⁵ Baruah, A.K; op. cit., no. 2; p. 28.

⁶ Baruah, A.K; op. cit., no.2; p. 29.

⁷ The proponents of melting pot theory, equate the concept of state with that of nation. Hans Kohn, Karl Deutsch adhere to this definition that, the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be the nation-state. Applying this definition in multi-ethnic societies, the dominant nationality will slowly assimilate the minor ones and thus forming 'one nationality - one state'.

The post independence era thereby, witnessed the formal emergence of what has been termed 'little nationalism', 'infra-nationalism' or 'sub-nationalism' centering on the major language-cultural groups. The various movements that these sub-nationalists throw up, prove that they aspire to maintain their identity. They seem to be very clear on the distinction to be made between their cultural identity in terms of nationality⁸ and their political allegiance to the state of India. Though, not to deny that there is a political dimension of nationality. Even if it is a cultural phenomenon, all nationalities view themselves as a political group. Statehood is an essential element, all nationalities claim a homeland to protect their cultural and economic interest.

Local pulls on linguistic identity had been there, but the reorganisation of states primarily on linguistic basis helped to strengthen these pulls, as the idea of state autonomy within a federal set up gave semi-political recognition to the primacy of particular language-culture groups in particular state such as sub-nationalism got mixed up with regionalism.⁹ So, regionalism has acquired meaning in the context of nation state. The linguistic, cultural and such similar loyalties which were harnessed to develop mass nationalism, the same loyalties also led to the emergence of mass regionalism because,

⁸ The term 'nationality' has to be distinguished from nation. A nationality is an immature form of a developing nation. Nationality imagines or it is culturally homogenous, thus strives for a measure of political, cultural and economic autonomy, short from full development into sovereign statehood. When it actually achieve such sovereign-state, it is transformed into nation. A nation is thus nationality plus an urge for independence. (See, Amalendu Guha in K.M. Deka (ed.), 'Nationalism and Regionalism in North-East-India', Dibrugarh University Press, Dibrugarh, 1985, p.41.)

⁹ Dutta, Birendranath; op. cit., no. 3; p.38.

common mass can be awakened more by parochial values than universalistic values. So, regionalism is not accidental, it is a fact of history, an - in built process within the framework of nationalism.

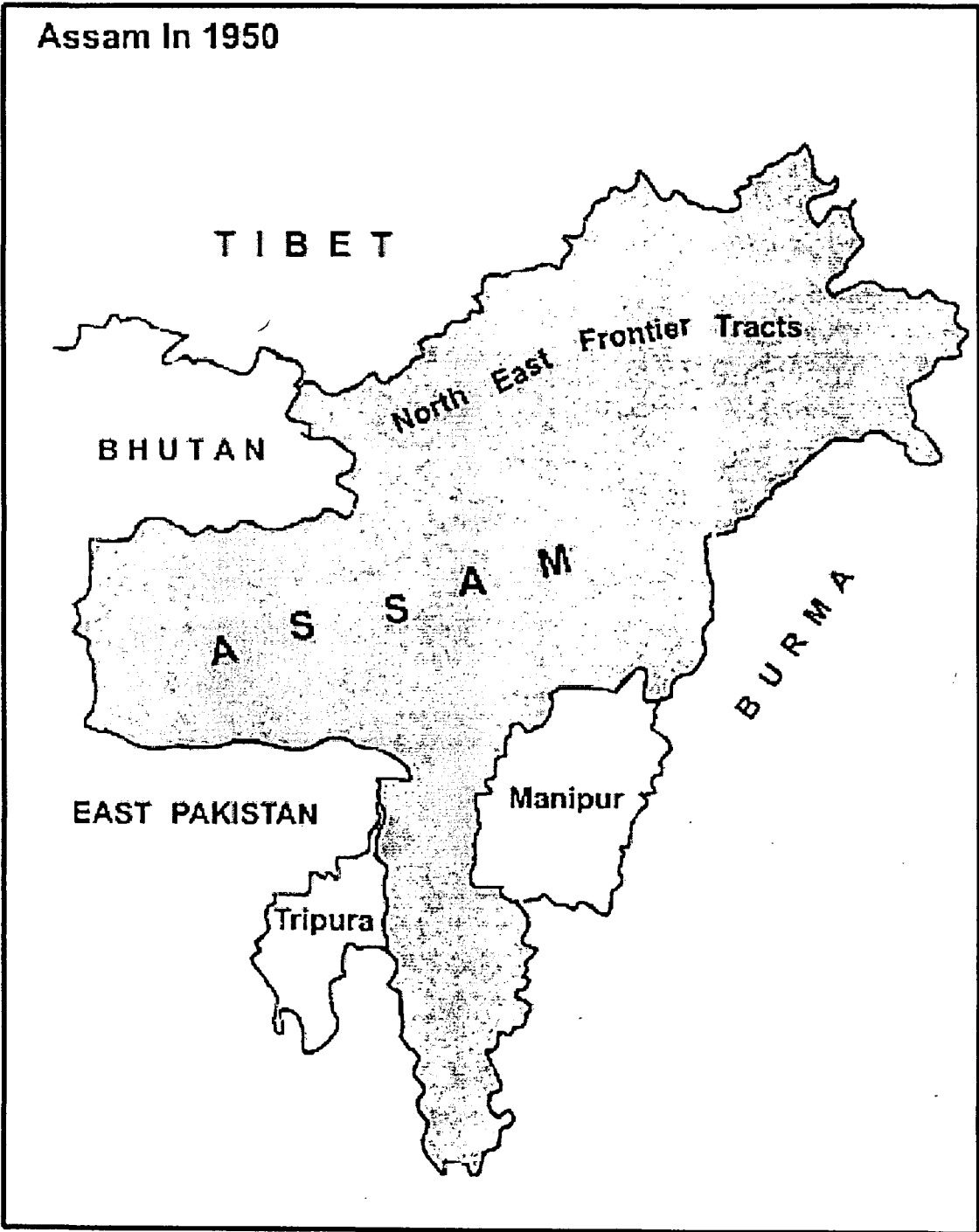
*Hans Kohn, Hertz, Joseph Stalin and Karl Deutsch*¹⁰ have enriched our understanding on nationalism. The Marxist scholars sees nationalism as a result of the development of capitalism. From this point of view 'regionalism' emanates when there is unevenness in the development of capitalism. But, such an explanation does not hold strong seeing the Indian scenario. In this country, regional pulls have not come from least development such as Bihar, U.P., Madhya Pradesh but from Pubjab, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kashmir, North-East, except for North-East, others are relatively more developed from the above. Moreover, the regional-nationality consciousness need not be in conflictual relationship with national consciousness. They may be contradictory to each other only under conditions of exploitative relationship not under conditions of fraternal relationship.

This calls for a re-appraisal on the perspective of regionalism. It must be realised that even smaller streams must have their rightful recognition in the creation of the national mainstream which is after all a confluence of all of them. Accommodation must be the proper way, because, from the vistas of history even Assam has well-recognised features, which it has contributed to the composite Hindu Indian culture. The spirit of Indian nationalism has found congenial soil for it's

¹⁰ Stalin has emphasized the role of quick means of transportation (apart from history) as a major factor in the growth of nationalism, whereas, Deutsch has placed emphasis on social communication as an important variable for growth of national consciousness. Since these conditions were available after the 17th century, henceforth, prior to it the existence of factor like religion, culture or a language did not materialize to the formation of 'nationalism'.

growth in Assam. Written history may be silent, but folklores bear testimony of their commonness with other social groups of India. The scope of such thinking could never be streamlined, because from the time of independence, till today integration is seen only in the political context. Whereas the political state of India has large acceptance seeing the participation of Indian voters on the parliamentary politics, but the various sub-groups are apprehensive of their cultural integration, which they see as a threat to their identity.

We need to have a look at the needs of the various sub-groups because, regionalism is the positive aspect may be an essence of self-fulfillment on the part of the people of that area. But rather the negative aspects, as a psyche of relative deprivation have made a better outlet. Regionalism generally is a result of the interplay of several variables like, geographical isolation, ethnic, cultural peculiarities, economic or class interest, independent historical tradition etc. As more and more development programmes are carried out, the regional disparities are growing. These escalate tensions of which the North-East gives a vivid example. The entire region is characterised by socio-political instability and economic backwardness. Assam has also experienced many problems, like inflow of migrants, land alienation, lack of industrial infrastructure and various other factors, which potentially has been influencing the Assamese identity consciousness. The independence of India could not solve any problem rather, brought in fresh tension to the region.



Source: Baruah, Sanjib, 1999

Courtesy by Prashant Pastore

3.02: India's Partition: Assam's Agony

India's 'North-East'¹¹ had to bear the brunt of partition along with the 'North west' frontier province of India. Partition had brought distinct changes to the region. The North-East emerged around the state of Assam, the Brahmaputra valley became its core. Problems in this part had its fall out on the entire region. After Partition, Assam was inter-linked to the Indian mainland by a small stretch of corridor through North-Bengal. This created a sense of isolation. Whereas, prior to independence, its natural outlet was through East-Bengal via Dibrugarh (a district in upper Assam), it carried on trade through the Chittagong port. It also benefited much from Sylhet, known as the 'rice bowl' of Assam. After partition, it had to face a severe loss in trading, it is now dependent on that small stretch of passage for all its purposes; the only link of the inland with the mainland India.

With partition, its provincial boundaries, turned into international frontier. Infact, the security of India now depended much on the security of this region. East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) and China became a threat for the people of this region. This did stir up a centripetal urge to remain in India with expectation that the Centre would help the region to cope with its various problems that came along with partition. But, rather it could never find a solace for its economic backwardness and social insecurity in the Centre. This led to somewhat bitter relations with the Centre. Migration and settlement of

¹¹ The concept of 'North-East' frontier was evolved by the British, after they conquered Assam and other tribal lands located between Bengal and Burma towards the end of the nineteenth century.

refugee from East Bengal became the major issue of tension between the Centre and the state of Assam.

Assam expressed its helplessness in settling about three lakhs refugees, that came from East Pakistan after partition due to, non-availability of land. Migration was already an antagonising phenomenon that Assam faced in the colonial period and was reluctant to bear the same problem again. At Assam's unwillingness, *Jawaharlal Nehru* wrote to *Gopinath Bordoloi*¹² in May 1945 that, "You say there is no further land available in Assam. This is a question of fact, which can be easily be determined. It is patent, however that if land is not available in Assam, it is still less available in the rest of India."¹³ *Bordoloi* was deeply hurt at the Centre's unsympathetic attitude, and its inability to learn the truth of the fact. The major problem that Assam faced at that time was severe financial crises due to the non-development of the region and could not afford to take further burdens.

But, *Nehru* utterly failed to show concern for the people, his insensitivity in handling the Cabinet Mission Plan was also not forgotten. However, the Centre had done nothing to differentiate the illegal from the legal migrants. Assam demanded that strong measures should be taken up by the Centre like introduction of permit system,

¹² Gopinath Bardoloi (1890-1950), was a Gandhian, a freedom fighter, a statesman, a humanitarian, a leader and the saviour of Assam. He was popularly called 'Lokapriya'. He joined the freedom movement in 1921. He was deeply interested in improving the life of the people. He was dedicated to the cause of 'Education' and 'Development of Tribals'. He became the Chairman of the 'North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas sub-committee'. He became the first Chief Minister of Assam. (See, Baruah, L. M.; 'Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi: An Architect of Modern India', Gyan Publishing House, 1992).

¹³ Mishra, Udayon; 'The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland; Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 2000; p. 111.

etc. The Assam tribune wrote "The Center must not be blind to Assam's interest and must not adopt any policy that will ultimately lead to annihilation of Assam. The danger point has almost reached, and the Center should not expect Assam to commit suicide with her eyes wide open"¹⁴ Probably, pulsing the tensed situation, the Indian Parliament passed the "Immigration Expulsion Act' on February 1950, but the act could not be implemented in true sense and this did not discourage Muslim migration from East Pakistan to continue. Congress's failure sowed seeds of discord against the Center, and it did not take much time for the state elites to awaken the mass. *Bordoloi* could still control the situation, but after him things became more difficult to handle. Assam became increasingly aware of it's palpable position. Several problems arose in the state as a cause as well effect of migration.

3.03: Migration: A Burning Question, Unanswered?

Migration has been a major source of demographic change in the state of Assam. A simple explanation of the term 'migration' is that it must involve a move from one political unit to the other Therefore, such movement of people ought to have political implications. Internal migration is often supposed to be for the socio-economic interest of the society. But inter-state and international migration generally results in severe political crises.

Regarding the effects of population change there are differences of opinion. On one hand, the neo-Malthusian view argues that population growth is responsible for most social problems, including economic

¹⁴ Phukan, Girin; 'Assam: Attitude to Federalism', Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1984; p.28.

under-development. Scholars like *Philip Hauser, Kingsley Davis* etc. have marked the relationship between poverty, population growth and political instability. The other view, which seems to be more popular in the third world countries is that population influx is not the major cause of under-development but rather it's consequences. Scholars like *Myron Weiner, Nazli Chaucri* argue that it is wrong to suggest that population growth as an independent variable can explain instability, violence, etc.¹⁵ A synthesis of the different views would suggest that there is a inter-relationship between socio-economic changes and population changes. Even, political crisis, conflicts have also resulted in large-scale migration like, the partition of India, which brought fresh exodus of people across border. In a situation like Assam, where job opportunities were limited, development and modernisation were just opening up, it gave a stiff competition to the natives vis-à-vis the migrants.

Persons who migrated to India from Pakistan after partition and before July 26, 1949 automatically became Indian citizens. After this cut-off date, immigration had to be completed through a legal process. Several acts have been passed like the Foreigners Act of 1946, the Registration of Foreigners Act of 1939, the Citizenship Act of 1955, the Passport Act of 1967, etc to control the flow of migrants. In spite of all, the inflow of illegal migrants remained unabated. Mainly because of (a) porous borders, (b) the new comers were helped by their relatives who had already settled down (c) the non-enforcement of proper laws became their greatest boon.

¹⁵ Bhushan, Mani; "Demography and Politics", 'Teaching Politics', vol 15(I), 1989; p.26.

A comparative study of Assam and India (1901-51) shows that, Assam registered a higher growth rate. ¹⁶ After independence also this phenomenon continued. In the pre-partition days, Assam's population increased by 17 to 20 percent per decade, and after independence it became around 35 percent. The following tables given evidence to this fact.

Table 3. 1: Decadal Variation of Population (1951-81)

Year	Population Variation of Assam (in percent)	Population Variation of India (in percent)
1951	19.94	13.31
1961	34.97	21.64
1971	34.95	24.80
1981	30.60	20.60

Figures for 1981 are projected on the basis of 1979 data as there was no census in Assam.

Source: Chhabra, K.M.L, 1992; p.29.

Independent India's first census shows that the population growth rate of Assam is at 19.4 per cent. It nearly gets doubled within ten years of independence. In 1961, it rose to 34.97 per cent. It decreases by .02 per cent i.e. it stands at 34.95 per cent in 1971. The growth rate substantially declines in 1981 which, can be due to the fact

¹⁶ Variation of Population growth rate of Assam and India's (1901-51)

Year	Assam Variation (per cent)	India variation (per cent)
1911	16.99	5.73
1921	20.47	-0.30
1931	10.92	11.00
1941	20.37	14.23
1951	19.94	13.31

Source: K.M.L. Chhabra, 1992; p.29.

of out- migration of Muslim population after the creation of Bangladesh. In comparison with Assam, India's growth rate considerably increased from 21.64 percent in 1961 to 24.80 percent in 1971 and declined to 20.60 percent in 1981. A significant feature of the above analysis shows that, throughout the period Assam's population increase has been much greater than all-India figure.

In 1961, Assam experienced a steep rise in population growth, 34.77 percent from 19.94 in 1951 (table 1). According to the Census Commissioner of Pakistan, the population of Pakistan increased by 23.7 percent during this period, but the population of East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) rose, by only 20.9 percent.¹⁷ There was obviously flow of Muslim population from East Pakistan to Assam and her neighbouring state.

Susanta Krishna Das highlights that along with Muslim migrants, there are other factors which was responsible for the steep population increase since 1951:

1. An acceleration of natural rate of increase.
2. Influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from East-Pakistan.
3. Heavier inflow of Indian national from the rest of the country.
4. Relative absence of mobility of the indigenous people of Assam.¹⁸

Thus, the high rate of population growth can be attributed to other factors as well. *K.M.L. Chabbra* has stated that, while

¹⁷ Das, Aniya Kumar; 'Assam's Agony: A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis', Lancers Publications, New Delhi, 1982; p. 44.

¹⁸ Chabbra, K.M.L; op. cit., no.19; p.30.

undoubtedly net migration into Assam is highest among all states, the quantum does not fully account for the steep increase in population growth. It is relevant to take into account certain other features apart from migration like General fertility Rates, Marital Fertility Rates, Reproduction Rates and sex ratios etc.¹⁹ Assam's both GFR and MRF is highest²⁰ compared to all India rate and other states of India. Combined with the highest infant mortality rate of 184 per 1000 live births in Assam in 1961 (next to Uttar Pradesh where it was 186) birth rate could be expected to be high. It is a common experience that in couples not practicing family planning method, the chances of nearly second pregnancy following infant death are usually high. The other reasons for high birth rate are very high marriage rate among women accounting for a very high general fertility and marital fertility.²¹

Contributions of other factors to the population growth was put at the back burner, the flow of migrants was the major cause of worry. The most scintillating fact that sensitizes the whole issue is that most of migrants made an access to India illegally, except for a few who legally enrolled themselves as immigrants. This unchecked infiltration even goes undetected because of political reasons. The rate, at which Nepalis, Muslims and Bengali increased, it would not have been possible without political patronage. The illegal migrants are helped to get a legal stamp

¹⁹ Chhabra, K.M.L; op. cit., no.19; p.31.

²⁰ The General Fertility Rate (GFR) and Marital Fertility Rate (MFR) of Assam with all India rates per 100 women aged 15-44 during 1951-61.

	GFR	MFR
All India	197.0	232.0
Assam	258.0	317.0

²¹ *ibid.*, p.32.

as a resident of Assam by political parties who protect against their deportation in lieu of which they vote for the party. This is indicated by the rate of increase of voters in Assam.

Table 3.2: Increase of Voters in Assam

Election Year	Number of voters	Increase of voters	Percent Increase of voters between Election
1952	4,066,940		
1957	4,496,357	426,417	10.5 (in 5 yrs.)
1962	4,942,816	449,459	10.0 (in 5 yrs.)
1966	5,585,056	642,240	13.0 (in 4 yrs.)
1970	5,701,805	116,749	2.1 (in 4 yrs.)
1971	5,296,198	549,393	10.4 (in 1 yr.)
1977 (March)*	7,229,543	933,345	14.8 (in 6 yrs.)
1978 Feb (Nov 77)*	7,924,476	744,933	10.3 in 8 months)
1980 Jan (Sep 79)*	8,537,497	563,021	7.1 (in 21 Months)
			11.0 (1952-79)

- Month in which voter's list was prepared.

Source: Amiya Kumar Das, 1982; p.34.

The above table shows that throughout the period, there has been a considerable high growth in the percentage of voters. Not only in a duration of 5 years but also, within a year (as the elections were held). The voter's rate increased at more than 10 per cent, except in 1970 (which stood at 2.1 per cent) and at 1980, which was a little less than other period, at 7.1 per cent. The high rate of increase in the voter's list created furore among the Assamese, which led to the historic Assam movement.

Amiya Kumar Das has made a through study of the migration process, in '**Assam's Agony: A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis**', which shows that, inspite of the size of voters increasing, and the population growth rate reaching to enormous surplus, only a small number has reported themselves as immigrants in 1971. The 1951 census reported 1,344,003 persons as immigrants in Assam (born outside Assam), out of which 388,288 were from East Pakistan and only 510,715 were from Nepal and other states of India. However all of them are now Indian citizens.²² He takes the variation of population between 1951 and 1971 and the number of immigrants that actually reported do not suffice the condition at which population growth rate increased. He shows that, Assam had a surplus population of 3.2 million. The same trend continues in 1981, and there are no natural conditions, which could generate this surplus population. Therefore, what else can be a possible explanation for such a high population rises in Assam? A solid explanation would have been illegal migrants but political parties conceal this open fact.

The illegal migrants are confirmed by the voters list as legal resident, which makes it all the more difficult for their deportation. Though, the immigrants have settled in all the districts, there are few districts, which has a heavy concentration, as shown in the following table.

²² Das, *Amiya Kumar*; op. cit., no. 20; p.44.

Table 3.3 : Districtwise Settlements of Immigrants

District	Total Immigrants		Immigrants From Pakistan settled in				Immigrants from Nepal Settled in			
	1961	1971	Rural Assam		Urban Assam		Rural Assam		Urban Assam	
			1961	1971	1961	1971	1961	1971	1961	1971
Goalpara	1,50,164	1,83,222	1,22,351 (21.12)	1,46,14 (20.73)	23,599 (14.63)	32,613 (17.0)	3,256 (5.45)	3,240 (4.97)	346 (3.76)	510 (4.83)
Kamrup	1,44,862	1,79,56	1,06,352 (18.35)	1,31,85 (18.70)	30,025 (18.61)	35,650 (18.58)	4,870 (8.15)	7,890 (12.16)	3,172 (34.50)	3135 (29.69)
Darrang	1,08,060	1,12,26	1,76,87 (13.41)	80,221 (11.38)	10,737 (6.65)	16,742 (8.73)	18,695 (31.30)	14,230 (21.79)	324 (3.52)	455 (4.31)
Lakhimpur	91,291	1,16,31	37,216 (6.42)	57,399 (8.12)	28,469 (17.65)	30,989 (16.15)	20,882 (34.95)	23,200 (35.55)	3,780 (41.10)	3,576 (33.89)
Nowgong	1,40,078	1,80,37	1,14,454 (19.75)	1,52,12 (21.58)	22,171 (13.74)	24,174 (12.60)	2,768 (4.653)	3,200 (4.90)	561 (6.1)	655 (6.2)
Sibsagar	26,482	36,882	12,686 (2.19)	(18,720) (2.65)	7,998 (4.96)	11,162 (5.82)	4,784 (8.00)	5,380 (8.24)	778 (8.46)	1,255 (11.88)
Cachar	1,34,773	1,46,82	96,276 (16.61)	1,06,42 (15.05)	37,886 (23.48)	38,886 (20.3)	--	1,020 (1.56)		295 (2.79)
Karbi Anglong	17,646	17,498	12,409 (2.14)	9,839 (1.40)	437 (0.27)	894 (0.46)	4,494 (7.52)	5,910 (9.05)	235 (2.56)	555 (5.25)
N.C. Hills		4,356		2,240 (0.32)		701 (0.36)		1,230 (1.88)		130 (1.23)
Total	8,13,346	9,77,319	5,57,9,428 (99.99)	7,04,966 (99.95)	1,61,322 (99.99)	1,91,857 (100.00)	59,749 100.00	65,300 100.00	9,196 100.00	10,566 100.00

Source: Gupta, S.K. and Gupta, I.B, 1990; pp. 83-84.

The above data shows that, among the immigrants from Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) who have settled in rural Assam more than three - fourth settled in four districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong and Cachar. Together these districts accommodated about 76 per cent of people from Pakistan in 1961 as well as in 1971.²³

²³ Gupta, S.K. and Gupta, I.B; 'Conflict and Communication: Mass Upsurge in Assam'; Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1990; p.82.

In 1961, 21.12 per cent of immigrants from Pakistan settled in the rural belt of Goalpara, followed by Nowgong at 19.75 per cent. In 1971, the position was reversed, Nowgong accommodated more immigrants than Goalpara.

The urban sections, clearly marks Cachar, Kamrup and Lakhimpur district as the major areas of settlements of immigrants from Pakistan.

In 1961, the immigrants from Nepal who made rural Assam their home settled in districts of Darrang (31.29) and Lakhimpur (34.95). In 1971, the Lakhimpur district maintained its lead with 35.5 per cent Nepalis, but in the Darrang district the percentage of Nepalis came down to 21.8 in 1971.²⁴ The urban population of Nepalis mostly settled down in Lakhimpur and Kamrup.

A significant trend in the above table shows that both in 1961 and 1971, the districts which accommodated the highest percentage of immigrants from Nepal and Pakistan remained at its' position.

Migration has certainly affected the Assamese people adversely. Sharp rise in the population led to the fragmentation of land holdings and increase of pressure on the limited natural resources. With the beginning of state sponsored programs, after independence, some additional economic space emerged. The Hindu Bengalis who were historically more advanced could take advantage of the new opportunities thus giving the Assamese middle class a stiff competition. In agriculture the Muslim Bengalis were an economic threat to the

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 85.

Assamese peasants. The other variants of immigrants like Nepalis or Marwaris were not seen as a threat like the Bengalis. Though the Marwaris were the virtual controllers of Assam's economy, yet they were not a cause to worry for the Assamese. Since Assamese preference for jobs were in the hands of Bangalis, both Hindus and Muslims in urban and rural sectors respectively.

This economic domination from the outsiders got related to cultural domination, thereby nativist reaction had set in, which bore severe political implication. Post independence modernisation had left unresolved many of the colonial problems. The question arises whether 'modernisation' does not change the attitude pattern of the society? The modernisation and development theorist would argue that ethnic affinities are residual phenomenon, it would dissolve with the expansion of the capitalist market thus, will result in a shift from particularistic to universalistic identities. Thereby, ethnicity of identities will disappear with the transformation of feudal or semi-feudal society to capitalist society. However, in the North- East India, the primordial social ties remains untethered during the post-independent transition. Rather, the integration of world economy and political system has stimulated ethnic fragmentation within states. Therefore, economic development need not lead to an abandonment of traditional values. The question arises, what is development? Why is it in an era of expanding economy, parochial values are seen as protection to the identity of the native group?

3.04: The Economic Aspect of Identity

In the modern world, development is conceived as an overall enhancement of the quality of human life within a politically structured

and administrative community through governmental action. It is a history of interaction between man and his physical environment.²⁵ By development, the constitution of India means that the process of governance, while respecting human rights of all persons secures for all Indians freedom from material impoverishment.²⁶ 'Modernisation' and self reliance were the bottomline of the Sixth Five Year Plan. The term 'modernisation'²⁷ was interpreted as a structural and institutional change, the strategy for it's achievement was industrial development. Thus, India adopted a model which stressed maximisation of growth. It was assumed that rapid industrialisation and structural transformation would eventually spread benefits, and economic benefits would subdue other plural identities..

The various approaches to development strongly argued the if developing countries were to develop they have to give up their traditional values. These modernisation theories whether of the classical evolutionist or cultural relativist,²⁸ viewed development as a

²⁵ Asif Mohammad; "Development initiative and the Concomitant Issues in the North-East States' in K.S. Agarwal (ed.); 'Dynamics of Identity and Inter group relation in North-East India, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1999; p.39.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.41.

²⁷ Dapid Apter in 'The Politics of Modernisation' has distinguished between 'Development' and 'Modernisation'. He says, modernisation is a particular case of development and development is the most general results from proliferation and integration of functional roles in a community. Modernisation implies three conditions (a) a social system that can constantly innovate without falling apart, (b) differentiated flexible social structure (c) a social framework to provide skills for living in a technological advanced world.

²⁸ Classical evolutionist, like Taylor, Spencer and Morgan sees development as a modernist of human history stage by stage; savagery, barbarism and civilisation. Ultimately, it reaches the highest point represented by European techno-economic order and social institution. Marx also adheres to the progress of history but instead of slow commutative process emphasize on rapid qualitative transformation. Whereas, the cultural relativist like Weber and Parson put forward structural functional studies. They contrasted the traditional societies from the modern societies.

transition from folk culture to urban community, from tradition to modernity. *Parson*²⁹ combined the two approaches, re-affirmed the position of the West that under development in society result from it's lack of ability to acquire differentiated roles and specification of orientations found in the advanced societies.

*Andre Gundar Frank*³⁰ revealed the weakness of the mainstream theory of development. He and few other theorists attempted to formulate a theory of underdevelopment. Frank distinguished the industrial center and the periphery producing raw material as metropolis and satellite respectively. This kind of relationship not only found at the international level, but also within the state. This exploitative relations between the Center and the periphery results in uneven development and thus, resulting in internal colonialism. In India, the term has a special appeal for all sorts of ethnic, racial regional and sub-regional groups who feel they are culturally dominated economically exploited and politically oppressed. This sort of ethnic grouping enhanced the bargaining power with the state of India. The movements have assumed different forms ranging from small-scale linguistic conflicts to large-scale agitation for territorial status of statehood. Infact, ethnic social boundaries came to be redefined through the process of modernisation.

²⁹ Talcott Parson placed emphasize on autonomous cumulative process of growth within individual societies He identified traditional societies with variables like ascriptive status, diffuse roles and particularistic values and modern society with achievements status, specific roles and universalistic values.

³⁰ Andre Gunder Frank emphasized that underdevelopment is not original or tradition. He rejects the view that societies can be categorised into either on one hand as, modern, capitalist and developed and on the other as isolated, feudal or pre-capitalist and underdeveloped. Because, the developed countries may once have been underdeveloped; underdevelopment is the product of the same historical process like the capitalist developed countries.

It did not take long for policy planners and analyst to realize that these movements for identity assertion were actually the result of the modernisation process and that the entire approach to nation-building needed to be re-appraised. While the simple opposition of tradition and modernity, so dear to the expounders of modernisation theory, turned out to be an illusion, ethnic movements instead of disappearing during the years of post-colonial nation building, started becoming stronger.³¹

Assam's linkages with the outside market were opened with the establishment of the tea industry. Afterwards, natural oil, coal mines, forest development were promoted but, the assurance of economic upliftment did not come along with these development. The British did not try to develop the subsidiary industries related to the needs of tea industry, and brought it's requirements from Calcutta or London. The production was impressively growing, but benefits to the people of Assam were insatiable. Over the years, since independence the feeling of being an exploited region has gripped more severely the mind of the Assamese people. It sees itself as a neglected fringe of the Centre. Successive waves of outsiders to this region, has also added to the annoyance that these aliens were extracting all benefits of which the natives had a rightful share.

In the rural areas, there was enormous pressure on agricultural land and this led to the fragmentation of land holdings . The average size of the operational agricultural land holdings in Assam in 1970-71, was 1.45 hectares.³² There has been enormous reduction in the size of

³¹ Mishra, Udayan, *op. cit.*, no. 15; p. 154.

³² Chhabra, K.M.L; *op. cit.*, no.19; p.35.

the holdings. Crowded agricultural sector had its effect in shrinkage of pasture, de-forestation and soil erosion, which led to further detriment in agricultural productivity. Forest lands had further declined while compared to all-India, where total forest area increased. The density of population in Assam has been steadily increasing. According to 1971 census, the density of population in Assam (186 per sq. km.) was far more than all-India (177 per sq. km).

According to *Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya*, land is the basic issue. From the purely economic angle, it was a clash between the old settlers and the new. On this were superimposed other political motivations, like the electoral aspirations of parties and individuals. Land grabbing has been going on for centuries, though it could easily have been prevented and stopped.³³

Apart from land, other infrastructure for development faced severe constraints. Power shortage along with transport bottlenecks makes the region highly backward. Partition has increased the physical distance of this region, as now it is linked to the rest of the country by a narrow neck of corridor via North Bengal, and it also lost its port linkages. Economically it not only suffers from relatively high prices of consumer goods but the feeling of isolation has been a major block in joining the people of this region with the rest of the country.

And virtually, swelling unemployment became the major cause of youth unrest in Assam. Though, educational fields has developed but proportionality job absorption opportunities did not, thus leading to a alarming rise of unemployed youth. Another revealing fact is, most of

³³ *ibid.*, p.35.

the employment opportunities are taken over by the outsider in proportion to the indigenous people. The Employment Review Committee of the Assam Assembly made a sample survey in 1978 on the basis of employment of local youths in 11 units of public sector undertakings, 26 private sector industries, 5 units of nationalised banks one Reserve Bank unit and 241 Tea Gardens. From their survey it was found that out of a total number of 55,398 employees in the above concerns, 21,367 are not permanent residents of Assam.³⁴ On one hand, the Assamese are fearful of Muslim settlers who have occupied all the available wasteland. They are jealous of the over-arching domination of the Bengalis in services. All this had led to the widely held belief among the locals that Assam is being treated as a colonial hinterland.³⁵

Assam relatively compares itself with other states of India, and find it stands nowhere apart from the fact that the region has rich natural resources. Rather, it's natural resources and raw materials are squeezed out to feed industries outside the state. The location of major oil refinery at Barauni strongly hurted to sentiments of the Assamese in spite of technical objection, the Centre decided to build the major refinery at Barauni. The Centre justified it's stand by giving defence reasons and in lieu of which Assam, got a small refinery. The cost analysis report have shown that a refinery near the source of crude will be more economic than one established in a consuming Centre. Producing 60 percent of the country's crude all valued as Rs. 840

³⁴ Bhattacharjee, Mridul and Goswami, Sanjeeb; 'Assam: Agonies and Grievances'; National Publishing House, New Delhi, 1985; p.6.

³⁵ Singh, Manju; 'Assam Politics of Migration and Quest for identity'; Anita Publications, Jaipur, 1990; p.79.

crores, the royalty received by Assam for it . . . is Rs 22 crores only, as against the royalty earned at Barauni from Assam's crude amounting to Rs 60 crores . . . Assam produces 55 per cent of India's total tea, valued at approximately Rs.400 crores... royalty earned by Assam on the sale of Assam's tea per year is Rs.20 crores only, whereas royalty earned by West Bengal stands at Rs.42 crores.³⁶ Assam's sees its deprivation as a fall out of neglect by the centre.

The Centre is accused of not partaking appropriate measure to follow up planned development strategy for the region. It is accused of not transferring sufficient resources for accelerating the pace of economic development. But, there are writers who speak on the contrary, they say, rather than neglect, it is the process of change initiated by public and private agencies under different planning programmes that is bringing social and political tension to the region. K.M.L. Chhabra states in 'Assam challenge' that as a proportion of the State plan outlay Central assistance to Assam has been ranging between 74 and 97 per cent, which is uniformly higher than figure for all states.³⁷ Apart from this, Assam receives funds for various development programmes under the North-East Council.

The development process has however been giving rise to the emergence of new social, political and economic forces and institutions. On such force is the emergence of the literate elite which suffers from frustration of facing stiff competition in its native land. They are often critical of the political and economic instruments used for development

³⁶ Singh, Manju; op.cit., no.41; p.78.

³⁷ Chhabra, K.M.L; op.cit., no.19; p.38.

of their area. Many of them are apprehensive of losing their separate cultural identity.³⁸ Joseph A. Schumpetre the rated economist has remarked that development represents a process of 'creative destruction'. What has been happening in North East is a sort of destruction of existing institutions and values, without replacing them with appropriate institutions.³⁹

The preponderant perception of economic neglect, however was based on active as also fancied feeling of deprivation. The recurring havoc caused by floods and the turdy efforts at flood central, the unlimited waste of gas by burning without effective plans for its economic utilisation, the flow of 'black gold' for refinery elsewhere outside Assam, shrinkage of job opportunities with increase in the number of unemployed, recruitment by railway and banking sector and other authorities etc., conducted outside Assam, and auction of Assam tea at Calcutta were features accentuating the feelings of deprivation.⁴⁰ The outcry was that the benefits of economic planning was debarred from the native population and Assam thereby remained relatively backward, which would not had been it's fate; had there been no such huge exodus of immigrant population. Linguistic differences between the migrants and indigenous people further generated tensions, which led to agitation and protest. The problems which are basically socio-economic in origin, have politico-cultural implications.

³⁸ Ganguly, J.B; op.cit., no.36; p.103.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.99.

⁴⁰ Chhabra, K.M.L; op.cit., no.19; pp.38-39.

3.05: The Cultural Aspects of Identity:

The stature of cultural identity, symbolized by 'language' has been forwarded fundamentally to strengthen the role of the Assamese community vis-à-vis other communities and thereby to create a political space at the national level. Though, Assamese is the most important language group of Assam, but there are as well, other indigenous language groups⁴¹. The social structure of Assam has also been influenced by the role of immigration.

The Assamese is the majority spoken language in Assam and the Bengali is the largest linguistic minority. They have close-relationship, which spells out their urge to be distinctly distinguishable. The relationship has been strained due to historic reason, which has been already discussed. It is now necessary to carry forward to the post-independence complexities.

The Indian National Congress kept the project of solving all conflicting interest postponing till independence. With the emergence of the Indian state, the most formidable task was to tie the knot of integration. There were definite political goals set and mediation of contradictory class conflict was sought to brought out by organisation of single national market. But, the adjustment of state boundaries which was entangled with the question of language identity, posed serious threat to the integration process. The numerically dominant

⁴¹ Apart from Assamese; Bodo, Mikir, Mising and Garo are the indigenous language groups of Assam. Of course, indigenous and migrants are relative terms. Many indigenous group too, were descendents of migrants. Use of the term migrant means groups that were part of the modern migration since the middle of the 19th century.

language group in each state made special claim to the territory it occupied and to any economic and educational activities that took place. In Assam, where the proportion of the migrant population is high, there were demands for ordinance and legislation to restrict the opportunities and cultural position of the migrants. Since 1947, the emerging Assamese middle class sought to use their control over state government to assert the paramountcy of Assamese cultural identity and to seek economic and social equality in relation to Bengali middle class.⁴²

The size and the rate of increase of Bengali population was a major cause of worry for the Assamese. It did disturb the economy and the Assamese felt burdened with solving the problem of migration settlement. However, the census reports no negative alteration to the Assamese population.

The census indicates steady rise in the number of Assamese speaking population as shown below:

Table 4: Variation in Population of Different Language Group

Language	1951		1961		1971	
	Speakers (in Lakhs)	Percentage of total	Speakers (In Lakhs)	Percentage of Total	Speakers (in Lakhs)	Percentage of total
Hindi	3.07	3.82	5.14	4.74	7.92	5.92
Bengali	13.25	16.50	20.09	18.54	28.82	19.71
Assamese	45.52	56.69	67.58	62.36	89.05	60.89
Others	18.45	22.99	15.56	14.36	20.46	13.93
Others	80.29		108.37		146.25	

Source: K.M.L. Chhabra, 1992; p.17.

⁴² Goswami, Sandhya; 'Language Politics in Assam'; Ajanta Publications, Delhi, 1997; p.29.

The number of Assamese speakers reached around 60 per cent in 1971, whereas Bengali population stood at 19.71 per cent in 1971. Therefore, the above table shows the Assamese constituted more than 50 per cent of the total population.

The official figures, as stated above shows a negligible increase in the Bengali population. But, this is half truth, the Bengali Muslims in their struggle for survival, declared Assamese as their mother tongue. They even supported the 'Language Bill'. But, the Assamese could never trust them because it was quite possible of them that, they would revive their choice of mother tongue and consequently would reduce the Assamese to minority status. The Assamese dominated Congress party was particularly interested in improving the position of the Assamese speaking population. The Assam Government on 26th September 1947, stated "Assamese is to be accepted as compulsory second language in all schools where it can not be Assamese completely".⁴³

The Assamese middle class took up language identity as the pride of the Assamese nationalism, which they are to protect under any circumstance. *Assam Jatiya Mahasabha*, *Axomiya Xangha* and *Axom Xahitya Xobha*, took leading roles in this regard. They were quite vocal about the recognition of Assamese as a state language and medium of instruction under the slogan 'Assam for Assamese'.⁴⁴ The *Axom Xahitya*

⁴³ Goswami, Sandhya; op.cit., no.48; p.30.

⁴⁴ By Assamese, it meant that those who feel for the betterment of Assam and the Assamese. Anyone who takes up the interest of the Assamese as his own, and call himself an Assamese can claim equal right with the children of the soil (See, Sandhya Goswami; op.cit., no.48; p.31).

*Xobha*⁴⁵ took the leadership in awakening the mass. It gave a cultural platform to the political movement.

The riots of 1948 and 1950 were the starting point to the demand by Assamese youths that the Bengalis should accept the Assamese language. There were disturbances in 1951, with the initiation of the process of census enumeration. Recognition of Assamese as state language under the eighth schedule led to sporadic tensions. The 'official language bill' was introduced in Assam Assembly on 10th October, 1960 declaring Assamese as the official language in Assam and provision was made for the use of Bengali in the district of Cachar.⁴⁶ Cachar district and hill areas stood opposed to the bill because it would place the non-Assamese under disadvantageous position for getting employed in state services. There was violence, killings, arson, and looting in both in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. The press writings were both criticising and appreciating such a stand.

The ruffled feelings of Cachar though were mollified to some extent by Lal Bahadur Shastri's three language formula (1961) by making Bengali, as the official language in the district of Cachar. Violence erupted again in 1972 when the University of Gauhati resolved to make Assamese in place of English the medium of instruction and

⁴⁵ The *Axom Xahitya Xobha* was formed in 1917 to promote art and culture. From its very inception it got government patronage. The Sabha pressed for cultural and economic upliftment of the Assamese community. The language movement in 1960 was the first time, the Sabha was drawn into populist struggle and ever since have been participating in the various movements.

⁴⁶ Barpujari, H.K; 'North-East India: Problems, Policies and Prospects since Independence'; Spectrum Publications, Delhi, 1998; p.44.

examination.⁴⁷ The students build up mass movement and both Gauhati and Dibrugarh university adopted Assamese as the medium of instruction. The leadership in Cachar construed it as 'cultural genocide' on the linguistic minorities in Assam and hastened the formation of the Minority People's Right Committee' with the object of altering the language policy of the government or a further division of truncated Assam.⁴⁸ To assuage the feelings of the Bengali speaking people of Cachar the Assam Legislative Assembly put forward a bill for the establishment of a separate University in Cachar. This time, All Assam Student's Union (AASU) strongly opposed such a move.

The language question touched upon the issue of employment as well as cultural identity. The Bengalis favoured a parity of status of their language along with Assamese, to ensure employment opportunities. The Assamese saw the Bengalis as a hindrance to their economic development. In the Assamese-Bengali feud, the distance in the relationship of the tribal population from the Assamese grew, ultimately led to their demand for separate state. They felt, they were swamped out from their existence. Though, Official Language Act., 1960 stated that languages of the hills was to be decided by the District Council. There were adequate safeguards provided under sixth scheduled which vest the tribals with legislative power. But, they saw their fate was clutched in the hands of the Assamese. The government interest to integrate the tribals were on the principle of security, integrity and stability. But the Assamese chauvinism mared their slow

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.44.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p.45

integration by forcing their language on the hills men. This was sharply resented and the fall out of which, is the 'Assam Reorganisation and the North-Eastern Area (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 which sees the emergence of the seven states of north-east: Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, and two Union Territories, now states, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh.

We see, a close connection between common language and territorial boundary. The fact remains that language boundary always do not coincide with national or state boundaries does not fundamentally change the matter. The pre-independence formula to the organisation of state was 'one language, one state' which was supplemented in the post-independence era by 'one state, one language'. The former stood as state reorganisation on the basis of common language, whereas the later stands for common official language of every state. The INC's stand on recognition of linguistic province during the freedom movement was supplemented by the report of Dar Commission and the JVP Committee⁴⁹ which warned against linguistic provision and expressed that it would be a formidable hindrance to national integration. There was severe dissatisfaction among the people, ultimately the SRC⁵⁰ resolved the issue by

⁴⁹ The JVP Committee was formed at the Nagpur session of the Congress, 1948, comprising of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Pattavi Siturammyya, to consider the question of linguistic reorganisation of state based on the report of Dar Commission.

⁵⁰ The State Reorganisation Commission (SRC) comprising of Sayyid Fazl Ali (Chairman), H.N.Kunjru and K.M. Panikhar appointed by a Resolution of the Ministry of Home, 29 December 1953. The Commission observed that 'language and culture of an area have an undoubted importance. "In Considering reorganisation, however there are other important factors which have to be borne in mind... the preservation and strengthening of the unity and security of India. Financial, economic and administrative consideration are almost equally important . . . (See H.K. Barpujari; op.cit., no.52; p.3).

advocating a federal plan based on linguistic states. Thus, linguistic reorganisation had changed the balance of power in favour of the states. The formation of linguistic states is one of the most important stage in the democratic solution of the national question.

Borris. I. Klyyev says, 'I completely accept Nehru that people cannot grow without their language, but in order to make them and their language grow, a barrier must be erected between them'.⁵¹ Language is no doubt, an indispensable pillar of the individual identity. Herder went beyond this saying that no people can retain their ingenuity unless they maintain their linguistic or ethnic authenticity. He held the view that the future of mankind, depended on the diversity of values, ideas, insight, that only the diversity of language and ethnicity collectivities could provide.⁵²

At the individual level, there is lot of adoption of different values from other language group. There goes on a slow process of melting of language identity with another language. Although, language loyalty has been often characterized as a primordial loyalty, but is often found to be a variable dependent on political and economic factors. Political mobilisation has led to open language conflict. The tensions generally were build up after the 60's, reaching to a stage of 'autonomy' and various ethnic communities demanded claims to the right of self-determination.

⁵¹ Klyyev, Borris. I; 'India: National and Language Problem'; Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1981; p.167.

⁵² Kumar, Shailendra, 'Suicide of Language Identity' in R.S. Gupta and others (ed.), 'Language and the state: Perspective on the Eight Schedule'; Creative Books, New Delhi, 1995; p.215.

3.06: The Political Aspect of Identity

The organisation that pioneered to generate awareness on the consequences of immigration on the socio-economic activities of the native inhabitants was the All Assam Student's Union (AASU). The AASU could create credibility of its stand by mass mobilisation. What basically started as a demand for revision of the voter's list of Mangaldai Constituency (Parliamentary) later turned into full scale movement against the immigrants, popularly known as the Assam Movement, (1979-85). The basic premises of the movement was detection, deletion of foreigner" from the voter" list and their deportation. Collectively under the banner of AAGSP,⁵³ this movement gradually spread all over the state. A united front was given in support to the movement from various other organisation.⁵⁴ These organisation were patronized by the upper echelons of the Assamese society.

Both the Centre and the state government was unable to arrive at an immediate decision in consideration to their demands. The movement initially was conducted in a very orderly and disciplined manner obliging by secular principle. But, failure to receive positive responses increased the intensity of the movement, measuring to protest and agitation in the form of bandhs, rail roko and rasta roko, Ghereas and boycotts, blockade of movements of goods. Each of these measure was aimed at achieving a definite objective. Disturbance broke

⁵³ The All Assam Student's Union (AASU) and Purbanchal Lok Parishad merged in August 1979, at Jorhat to form the All Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP).

⁵⁴ The AAGSP had solid support from Asom Sahitya Sabha, Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD), Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad (PLP), Asom Jatiyabadi, Yuba Parishad Chatra, Asom Yuba Samaj, Young Lawyer's Forum, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, All Asom Tribal Sangha, Progressive Plain Tribal Council of Asom, etc.

out in pockets of Bengali-speaking population at Tinsuka, Dumduma, Duliajan and Naharkatiya. In areas, where the Assamese were in minority it had to seek shelter fearing violent repercussion. Certain areas in Cachar district were declared disturbed. There were about 120 incidents of arson and 127 cases of assault. Over 3, houses in about 40 villages had been burnt down and as a result 15,000 people rendered homeless.⁵⁵ The motto of 'satyagraha' was violated, anguish and tragedy spread all over the state. The 'Times of India' remarked "Whether the All Assam Students Union and Gana Sangram Parishad intended the matter to come to this or not, they must bear the major share of responsibility for the orgy."⁵⁶

Assam was on the top of the agenda, the Centre agreed that the names of the foreigners must be removed from the electoral rolls. But the decision on the cut-off date created difference of opinion with the AASU. The AASU-AAGSP agreed to accept all foreigners that entered Assam between 1951-61, whereas the Centre wanted the date to be extended to 25 March 1971, on the ground of 'Indira-Mujib treaty of friendship, cooperation and peace', 1972. Moreover the AASU was not willing to distinguish infiltrators on the basis of religion. Even after several rounds of talks the deadlock between the centre and the student leaders continued.

Political parties were divided on the issue. Congress I was depended on the immigrant's vote so opposed the movement the minorities were backed by the CPI(M). The RSS was supposed to have

⁵⁵ Barpujari, H.K; op.cit., no. 52; p.39.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

links with the Swechcha Sevak Bahini (SSB) of AASU, the SSB was formed at the RSS initiative in 1980. There were reports of violence, arson, looting from everywhere. The victims were not limited to one section of population, as either religious, ethnic or linguistic. It varied from place to place, depending on the majority minority composition of the population.

Amidst of all, election was held in 1983, the Congress formed the ministry leader by Hiteswar Saikia ⁵⁷ as the Chief Minister of Assam. The people defied it as an illegitimate government. Meanwhile cracks had appeared in the AASU-AAGSP leadership following the Nellie massacre. The Muslim section of the AASU accused it was pro RSS, Hindu Communal titled. The AASU was also threatened by the emergence of All Assam Student's Representative Union' (AASRU), a handiwork of the Congress agents. The AASU's attempt to bring all under one fold seeking unity as strength to their cause of immigrant expulsion proved to be a failure. But finally breakthrough was achieved when in 1984, the cabinet secretary *Krishnanswamy Rao Sahib* called the AASU leaders for resumption of talks. At the same time, The AASU was also toying with the idea of contesting election. Joining hands with the regional parties it formed the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP). In a mood to win vote and at the same time retain it's own people's confidence, it revived it's earlier stand and extending the cut-off date from 1951-61, to 1965. Whereas, the Centre was trying to make them

⁵⁷ Hiteswar Saikia (1934-95) had long terms with the political scenario of Assam. He was elected to the state Assembly in 1972. Took charge of the Home and the, Education department under Sarat Chandra Sinha Ministry in 1974. He had Cabinet rank in the Ministries of Sayeeda Anwara Taimur (December 1980- June 1981) and Keshab Gogoi (Jan-March 1982).

agree on 1971. The AASU was stern on its demand for the dissolution of the Saikia Ministry, accusing it as a mockery of democracy based on illegitimate voter's list.

The student leaders were invited again for talks in August 1986. The Centre agreed to fulfill the demands on reasonable grounds. Henceforth, the Assam Accord⁵⁸ was signed on 15th August 1985, which formally ended the Assam Movement. In the general elections, 1985, the AGP was sworn in to form the government. The winning of AGP in the election clearly explains its legitimate credibility in the eyes of the people.

The movement led by the student intellectual forum was a mass democratisation process of political articulation and an ethno-national expression of the inhabitants. This did encourage other ethnic groups, particularly the Bodos to pursue similar strategy. The encouragement to the Bodo leadership was alleged as a political insight by the Centre to destabilize the balance of power in the state.

The movement created rifts among various ethnic groups; each social group stressed on their identity and the need to have their share of development. The most formidable problem that still remained was the definition of the 'Assamese people'. The cultural and social identity

⁵⁸ The Assam Accord was signed by the Home Secretary, R.D. Pradhan and AASU President Prafulla Mahanta and General Secretary, Brigu K. Phukan. The Centre conceded to the following demands-dissolving the Saikia ministry, deport immigrants who settled in Assam after 1971 and disenfranchise 1966-67 migrants for ten years, on the economic and educational front, agreed to set up another refinery in Assam, Open Ashok paper and Silghat Jute Mills, and establish an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), a Central University (See, H.K. Barpujari; op.cit., no.52; p.73).

of the Assamese which have been discussed and re-discussed was most difficult to define in true terms. The All Assam Tribal Students Union (AATSU) opposed, that the Assamese language should be mandatory for state services. The AATSU challenged what do they mean by Assamese and culture? What happened to the culture and language of the tribes and backward classes? They resolved to resist any attempt to 'thrust' Assamese on the tribesmen?"⁵⁹

The AGP leaders could not resolve the tensions mounting, it could not draw up measures that satisfied the different sections of the society. It could hardly cope up with the hopes and aspirations of the people. These youth leaders who were agitating against the bereft of the people in the hands of the political leaders, proved to be no way different. They were sections of the accord which was still left unimplemented. It did not take much time for the fissiparous elements to grow into a revolutionary holocaust, thus began the insurgency phase in Assam.

3.07: Conclusion

The overriding deliberative attempts to bring the various ethnic groups into the main stream of Indian life, has been reproachfully addressed time and again. An ethnic demand to protect their identity has been a major question mark on India's claim to nation building. The underlying layers of dissatisfaction are repressed to some extent by offering certain degrees of autonomy under constitutional guidelines. However, this could hardly pacify the conflicts of interest between the states and the people. It is the lack of the level of understanding that

⁵⁹ Barpujari, H.K; op.cit., no.52; p.77.

have led to many difficulties in implementing economic and social development. Rather, the development parameters are measured by a distributive relationship between the Centre and the States, and between various ethnic groups claiming its share of economic benefits. Therefore, a sense of deprivation grew even as the development process was initiated.

The emerging middle class realised that struggle for jobs was not easy and drawing out a political space for themselves would mean enhancing their bargaining power with the Indian State. The middle class, as the spokesman of the masses resorted to sub-nationalist mobilisation; as the only means of protection and survival of their identity. The economic grounds also gave an impetus to the inclusion of cultural-language identity. Thus, each language-cultural group marked its level of development vis-à-vis the other, and saw the other's bargaining power as an outcome of its economic and cultural status. Therefore, issues of land, language, political autonomy gave the specific group a common platform for its ethno-nationalistic aspiration. Group-identities based on regional, linguistic, ethnic and communal tendencies shows in itself a failure to the concept of secular Indian nationalism, based upon which we did strive to build our Indian nation. It would be wholly untrue to say that there has been no attempt to meet the ethnic aspiration. But, what really lacks today is not political integration but a psychological integration. There is need for a balance of relationship, an understanding to develop between the various component units, that contribution to one's own region is in itself a development of the whole and not just its parts.

Coming back to the specific case of Assam, we find it presents a very complex picture of relative backwardness entangled with the question of population influx, interpreted as a threat of losing Assamese identity and culture. Assam, had experienced severe waves of migration, not only in the post independence period but also before it, the impact of which has been felt in the land economy of Assam. Thus, the land-man ratio narrowed down with the increase of population and unemployment rose following severe pressures on the economic system. The native reaction against the migrants got linguistic overtones; merely because majority of the migrant population belong to the Bengali language group. The strained relation of these two communities raised several controversial issues like official language and medium of instruction. Language become the criterion of benefiting economic and political opportunities. The Bengalis favoured equality of language status with the Assamese, but this would mean the Assamese losing economic opportunities to the Bengalis who were historically more advanced group. It was to primarily historical reason, we find most of the issues, even when not connected with language tend to be seen in terms of Assamese and Bengali rivalry.

Though, Assam Congress's leadership pursued cultural policies which would assert the Assamese identity, for instance to have Assamese as the official language of the state. But, immigration issue remained out of it's political agenda because it fully benefited from the block voting of large section of the so-called immigrants. It was not until the Assam movement, that a serious observation on the immigration problems were highlighted. But, soon when the leaders of the Assam

movement got the seat of State power, these issues were sidelined because even they could not ignore their political ambitions, they acted on prudence so as not to enrage any group.

The Assamese, harping on the identity of language have often overlooked tribal aspiration. The Assamese feared that it would be reduced to a minority group under the successive waves of migration, so started integrating the tribals under the Assamese fold. An attempted Assamisation of position and power aroused ethnic aspiration of preserving the tribal identity. Conflict over political space and maintaining group identity become the order of survival.

There are many issues which still remains unclear. The AGP could not resolve much of the problems, and unfulfilled aspirations took the shape of aggressive nationalism. The nationalistic aspiration harbouring the notion of 'Swadhin Axom' is in itself strong indictments of the Indian nation-state. The struggle for an independent Assam hold a centre-stage in the politics of the region. No discussion on Assam would be complete without taking into account the United Liberation Front of Assam; which adds a new dimension to the relationship of Assamese sub-nationalism with the Indian nation state.

Chapter 4

FRAGMENTATION OF ASSAMESE IDENTITY AND THE IDEOLOGY OF AN 'ASSAMESE NATION'

The concept of subnationalism has interpreted and paraphrased nation-state, with an urge to accommodate the principle of self-determination. The *Wilsonian* drafting of 'self-determination' are preferably suitable to the term 'nation' or 'people' when it correspondingly hold the meaning of states. But, when the idea was impugned with innumerable petitions for granting sovereignty and statehood, it was difficult to come to the terms of recognition to so many nations in the world. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) has submitted a petition to the United Nations for recognizing the sovereignty of Assam. Seen as a threat to the prevailing global political order, the principle no longer evokes sympathy as it did when, anti-colonial struggle was at its height. Sociologist *Amitai Etzioni*, argued that "it is time to withdraw moral approval" from most self-determination movements. While these movements, have been a positive force for more than two centuries, he wrote, they no longer have the capacity to create more democratic states. Now the thrust of many movements of self-determination, he believes, is destructive.¹

However, it puts a relative weight upon the governing elites and political scientist who have a consent over the process of nation-building. It requires an understanding, a systematic analysis which is sensitive to put insight into these acts of imaginations of contriving nations. Because, not all national projects and narratives are politically viable and some nations are insufficiently imagined. To use the word 'imagination' in the terminology of *Benedict Anderson's* published work,

'Imagined Community.' That, (a) the nation is imagined as *limited* because, it has finite boundaries beyond which lie other nations (b) it is imagined as *sovereign* because it is the gaze and emblem of freedom. (C) finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because regardless of actual inequality, it is conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship.

Like the epitaph of the Unknown soldiers, there are many emblems of national imaginings to hold the roots of nationalism. The imagined community that is the nation, is represented in the language of 'continuity' of an immemorial past and 'simultaneity' of temporal coincidence of events and activities. The subnational narratives are often premised like the national ones on the poetics of homeland and its people. A holistic view of the Indian nation, put alive the pan-Indian political community. But, within the Indian homeland there are multiple communities that demand institutional accommodation as a distinct entity.

The Indian State is a product of the anti-colonial struggle with simultaneous growth of Indian nationalism and subnationalism. The enduring tensions between the two, reflect the failure of the colossal project on nation-building. However, both nationalism and subnationalism are contested formations. They are a 'struggle over representation', though they may seek to represent a 'horizontal comradeship'; a site of homogeneity and equilibrium but, are rather engendered by social hierarchies. The hierarchy below tries to be loud and distinct over its representation from the above. The Assamese subnationalist discourse may seek to differentiate with pan-Indianism but, the tribal groups like the Bodos seek to differentiate from the Assamese.

¹ . Baruah, Sanjib; 'India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality'; Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999; p.2

It is in this effort of framing a cultural space that potentially germinates political turmoil. The cultural space is constructed with a sense of shared origin among the members of a community, and a sense of shared territory, which transform people into a 'collectivity'. The modern nation-state, has tried to fill the space with the political principles of democracy and governance but these could not meet the cultural aspirations. However, it has been already explained that this sense of 'collectivity' to transform into identity consciousness needs to be placed within historical specificities. The collective will of the community in its organisational capacity can be best thought of as civil society.² It is from the base of the civil society, the subnational politics derive its power of political bargaining with the Indian state.

Considering the diversity of Assam there has been conflict within the civil society. But despite dissent, the Assamese civil society has the ideological and organisational capacity of defining and pursuing its political agendas 1983 saw the violent consequences of a test of will between the Assamese Civil Society and the Indian state³. The *Axom Xahitya Xobha* and the All Assam Student's Union (AASU) are the two major organizations that have led many movements in Assam.

Though, both the organisations define themselves as non-political , it is not to deny that, they have catalyse serious jolt in the Assam politics. The Xobha played a key role in mobilising public opinion for the adoption of the Official Language Act of 1960, and Assamese language as

2. Jean Francois Bayart uses the concept of Civil Society in two senses. In the first, he defines civil society not as set of institutions but a social space. In the other sense, he addresses civil society as the collective will of the people. The 'collective will' means, the entire societies develops the capacity to bridge gulfs across cultures, religious or linguistic rifts and stand together against the state. But the civil society in India is plural, it has never stood unified against the Indian state. (See, Sanjib Baruah's; "Politics of Subnationalism: Society Versus State in Assam" in Partha Chatterjee (ed); 'State and Politics in India'; Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998; p.510).

3 Baruah, Sanjib; "Ethnic conflict as State – Society Struggle: the Politics and Politics of Assamese Micro Nationalism" in 'Asian Studies', vol. 28, 1994; p. 665.

the medium of instruction in 1972. The over zealous language policy clearly went against the concept of a broader Assamese identity. The Xobha's involvement in the anti-foreigner upsurge and its formally becoming part of the Gana Sangram Parishad raised serious doubts of its non-political stance and thereby lost its government patronage. Like the Xobha, the All Assam Student's Union too claim to be non-political- a curious claim for a body that brought normal politics in the state to a stand still for five years from 1979 to 1985 and whose leaders then proceeded to win elections and form the government of the state.⁴

The Assamese civil society was successful in bargaining with the central government, on the policy of enfranchising foreigners. A compromise was reached in the form of the Assam Accord. The accord was a broad settlement that not only included the foreigner's issue but other significant promises on key cultural and economic concerns. It promised . . . to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people⁵. The inward looking, revivalist tendencies and the overt attempts by the people here, to distinguish themselves from the outsiders are used as defence mechanism against the threat on their own ideas of the past. A line of distinction is drawn between the 'indigenous' and 'the immigrants' .

4.01: The 'Indigenous' and the 'Immigrants':

Assam in its past and present form has been a multi-ethnic region, and very rightly addressed as the melting-pot of diverse cultural streams. The Ahom's centralized administration and *Shankardeva's* reformist *Vaishnavism* has brought the different streams together to form the composite 'Assamiya' jati. However, the British brought radical

⁴ . Baruah, Sanjib; op.cit., n. 3; p. 668.

⁵ Baruah, Sanjib; op. cit., no.1; p.116.

changes to the region which soon drained the community's residual powers to withstand pressure.

Assam's population growth-rate has been increasing at an alarming rate in the 20th century in both pre and post independence era (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Assam, 1901-2001: Percent Increase of Population

Year	Growth-rate (Assam)	Growth-rate (All India)	Variation
1901-1911	16.99	5.73	11.26
1911-1921	20.48	-0.31	20.78
1921-1931	19.91	11.0	3.91
1931-1941	20.40	14.22	6.17
1941-1951	19.93	13.31	6.62
1951-1961	34.98	21.51	13.34
1961-1971	34.95	24.80	10.15
1971-1991*	52.44	48.24	4.2
1991-2001**	18.85	21.34	-2.49

* No census was held in Assam in 1981. Hence the growth rate is for twenty year period, 1971-91.

** Census of India, 2001.

Source: Sanjib Baruah, 1999; p.51.

Over a century, the study of demographic influx has been a recurrent theme in the Assam politics. With the exceptional case, of 2001, throughout there has been a constant increase.

The government is still very unclear on the question of legal and illegal migrants. The Centre's acceptance of allowing the Hindu refugees from Pakistan to settle in India and terming this process as legal does not resolve the issue. The Assamese on the other hand, do not distinguish between Hindu and Muslim immigrants. The Muslim

economic immigrants and Hindu political refugees are seen as an equal threat to the Assamese as a Bengali domination.

The Assamese fear of being minority in their own land explains why they are so keen to distinguish between the 'immigrant' and the 'indigenous' communities.

The 1991 census has classified Assam's population into speakers of 68 languages and dialects. The following table only list twelve languages that were claimed as mother tongue.

Table 4.2: Assam, 1991: Languages Spoken As First Language by more than 100,000 people

Language	Number of Speakers (as mother tongue)	Percentage of the total population
Assamese	12,958, 088	57.8
Bengali	4,856, 532	21.7
Bodo	1, 184, 569	5.3
Hindi	1,035, 474	4.6
Nepali	432, 519	1.9
Mising	381, 562	1.7
Karbi	355,032	1.6
Oriya	140,782	0.6
Santhali	135, 905	0.6
Manipuri	126, 987	0.6
Garo	114, 779	0.5
Rabha	112, 424	0.5
Others	579, 669	2.6
Total population	22, 414, 322	100.6

Source: Sanjib Baruah, 1999; p.19.

Among the languages and dialects listed above, Assamese, Bodos, Mising, Karbi, Manipuri; Garo and Rabha are considered 'indigenous' to

Assam. Whereas, Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, Oriya and Santhali are considered as 'non-indigenous.' The above division of the immigrant and indigenous speaker is based on the immigration process initiated during the colonial period.

Most of the immigrant population has accepted Assamese language and culture. The tea labour community have assimilated well into the Assamese culture. The Muslim Bengalis, Marwaris and Nepali have accepted Assamese for securing economic benefits. Even, the Hindu Bengalis of the Brahmaputra valley are no less keen to speak Assamese and have also participated in the Assamese cultural life. Moreover, the immigrant population does not accept the Assamese definition of 'indigenous'. The Bengali population in the Surma valley call themselves indigenous to the region. And, many so-called immigrants are born in Assam.

But, the Assamese are apprehensive about the migrant population mainly because of the fear of being reduced to a minority. At different points of times, these migrant populations had to bear the brunt of the Assamese fear. In 1948, the Muslims were the targets, in 1960's and 70's the Bengalis were targeted, in mid 60's the Marwaris, in the recent year the Bihari's and so on. The conflict over such issues have led to the assertion of linguistic chauvinism and communal feeling which were not the characteristics of the secular Brahmaputra valley.

Presuming threat all time from the immigrant population, the Assamese community had deemed to found peace in the Assam Accord's commitment to protect 'the identity and heritage of the Assamese people'. The term 'Assamese people' led to confusion among the tribals that they were not included in the accord, which led to severe identity crises.

4.02 The Illusion and Reality of the Assamese Identity

The region's confluence of culture and the assimilation process has been always referred by the Assamese mainstream scholars as '*Assamiyisation*.' A proud acclaim of the Assamese community's abound capacity to accept all in it's fold. Loyalty to Assamese language was seen as the sole criterion in establishing one's Assamese identity. The Assamese nationalist seemed to take it for granted that all other linguistic groups living in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys and in the hills of undivided Assam would accept Assamese as the only official language of the region.⁶ The most obvious result of this belief was the balkanisation of Assam in 1971.

Once Assam lost it's tribal regions and it's elite was cramped for opportunities in a shrinking hamelend, the ethnic Assamese became more and more restive with the existing demographic changes in the Brahmaputra valley.⁷ The Assamese were left with only plain tribals and the Assamese Muslims to share a sense of history and territorial existence of Assam. Therefore, incessant reminders of the 'commonness between them was inculcated. With the fragmentation 'Greater Assam', a sense of being let down by Delhi began to dominate the Assamese psyche. Suddenly, the media drew attention to all the earlier instances like, leaving Assam-to her-fate during independence or the 1962 war as evidence of Delhi's lack of commitment towards the Assamese people.

An urge was felt to protect the Assamese identity by forging a unity among the indigenous groups. The Assamese middle class leadership made emotive appeal of their commonness and that reminded of their

6. Mishra, Udayan; "Identity Transformation and the Assamese Community: Illusion and Reality" in Kailash S. Agarwal (ed); 'Dynamics of Identity and Inter group relations in North East India'; Indian Institute of Advanced study, Shimla, 1997; p. 101.

7. Bhaumik, Subir; "North-East India.' The Evolution of a Post Colonial Region" in Partha Chatterjee (ed); 'Wages of Freedom: Fifty years of the Indian Nation- state'; Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998; p. 317.

various contributions by the tribals and the Assamese Muslims that has enriched the Assamese Society. Cultural revivalism of *Shankardeva's* Vaishnavite movement became strong clause of unity among them. Because, not only the Ahoms and Assamese caste Hindu, but also the plain tribals and the Assamese Muslims were influenced by the movement. The martyrs of Assam history, the *namghar* (house of prayer) the annual *bihu* festival became the emblems of national imaginings.

- Based on similar lines of identifications the Assamese had tried to bring the plain tribals within the fold of the Assamese nationality. The Assamese political leaders since pre independence time were convinced that it is not possible for survival of both the communities in isolation. While it is true that some section of plain tribals has been demanding a separate region since pre-independence time but *Bordolai* and tribal leaders like *Rupnath Brahma* had stood opposed to it. With his sincere conviction of the homogeneity of the Assamese nationality, *Bordoloi* was not prepared, it is true, to reverse the process of assimilation by putting the plain tribal on the same footing with tribesmen in the hills.....⁸ Because, the plain tribals were designated as Hindus and only for political reasons since 1941, were designated as tribals. The Assamese leaders argued that for the protection of their tribal identity, the Sixth Schedule of the constitution could be implemented in right earnest.

- With the rise of the middle class among the tribal community, they began to assert their grievances. They accused the Assamese mainstream of subverting their aspirations by depriving their legitimate share. The balance of power between the tribals and non-tribals was a question of contest. Assam was threatened with further bifurcation. Thus, the Assamese subnationalism took an extreme turn, with a segment growing from it's own germs in the name in the name of Udayachal or Bodoland.

⁸ . Barpujari, H.K; 'North-East India: Problems, Policies and Prospects since Independence'; Spectrum publications, Delhi, 1998; 93.

The Bodos being the most historically advanced group among the plain tribals represented them in their demand for a separate state. The movement for Bodoland⁹ was led by the All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU) to "Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty." It is true that, the plain tribals had supported the Assam Movement as the immigrants equally effected them. But, after the Assam Accord was signed, they withdrew their support as they view it was a move aimed at protecting only the identity of the Assamese speaking people. The failure of the AGP government to meet their various demands sparked off ethnic violence and ultimately led to the emergence of the radical organisation called the Bodo Security Force (BdSF).

The move for separate 'Bodoland' is to bring all other plain tribals like the Mising, the Deoris, the Rabhas, the Lalungs, the Mechs, the Hajois, the Sonowal Kacharis and Barmans of Cachar in a single fold along with the Bodos. Whereas, the Assamese leaders and Assamese cultural organisations are trying to accommodate these indigenous communities within the Assamese nationality. The ground reality of the illusion of a common Assamese identity is that, it is fragmented.

Today, there is a trend of reversing assimilation. The Bodos talk of a cultural differentiation with the Assamese. They do not accept that they have been influenced by Vaishnavite Hindu practices. There is a revival of the worship of *Bathau puja*. The *Bathau* deity is recognised as Hindu Shiva God. Therefore, the Bodos relate themselves to Savite or Shakta Hinduism. The most assertive battleground of cultural politics is language. Therefore, they had abandoned the Assamese script for their language and accepted the Devnagri script and are demanding for the use of Roman script. The Bodo's demand for the Roman script or use of

⁹ . The first demand for a separate state 'Udhyanchal for the Plain tribals was made by the plain Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967 after the formation of Nagaland. But, it was during the first AGP government rule in 1987, the younger Bodo leaders began to mobilize ground for the separation of Bodoland from Assam.

the term 'Bodoland' instead of priority used term 'Udayanchal' are projects to bring out their protest against the cultural hegemony against the Assamese as well as the Indi-Sanskritic origin, i.e. the Pan-Indian culture. Food and dress are the other arenas the Bodos today assert their difference.

The 'parapolitics of clashing public identities as *Clifford Geertz* once said of such conflict, have their "characteristic battlegrounds". Among the areas that become a focus of such conflicts, he listed the school system (particularly the instruction media) social statistics, dress, historiography and official insignia of public authority. What these battleground draw attention to is an important aspect of subnational conflicts. That they are not necessarily about ethnic exclusiveness as much as about defining the public identity of a place.¹⁰

It is not just the plain tribals even the Assamese Muslim who considered himself Assamese more than a Muslim are reacting over the assimilation process. With more and more immigrant Muslims joining the Assamese mainstream, the social divide between the indigenous Assamese Muslim and the one-time Bengali Muslim immigrants is bound to become thinner and a more numerous and more cohesive Muslim identity will inevitably emerge.¹¹ Infiltration from Bangladesh still continues. The 1991 census shows that during 1971-91 period the percentage of Hindu population in Assam fell from 72.51 percent in 1971 to 67.13 percent in 1991. On the other hand, the Muslim population in the state increased from 24.56 percent in 1971 to 28.53 percent in 1991.¹²

The Ahoms who have shared a close affinity with the Assamese caste Hindus had also tried to sought cultural revivalism of their own

¹⁰ . Baruah, Sanjib; op. cit; no.1; p.99.

¹¹ . Mishra, Udayaon, op. cit. 6; pp.112-113.

¹² . Ibid; p.115.

heritage. The community who were one-time rulers of Assam, today laments for their lost privilege and status. There are few sections among them who want a separate status in the census as 'Ahoms' and not Assamese. Though, both the Assamese Muslims and the Ahoms have not spearheaded a movement for separation at any points of time but if ever they did, it would not be a strange phenomenon. There is an effort of cultural revivalism going on among all the groups of Assam.

The question arises whether the Assamese nationality will be able to secure itself only if the number of Assamese speakers is secured in the census or will socio-religious-economic and cultural factors also count? Will the Assamese continue to suffer from the dilemma of being a minority in its own land?

In effect to the tribal stand, AASU is trying to reformulate on its earlier acceptance of March 25th, 1971 as the date of expulsion of foreigners in the Assam Accord. The AASU is pressing for the 1952 general election as the cut off date. The AASU has demanded cent percent reservation of Assembly and Lok Sabha seats for the indigenous people based on 1951 National Register for Citizens (NRC). But, the justifiability of NRC is rather a matter of debate. Because there are many Bengali Hindus who, came after 1950 through a legal process. On what basis the AASU will question their constitutional right of contesting elections? It is not easy to pass such abrupt statements because it is not easy to define who are indigenous people and who are not. On the question of indigenosity, there are several other controversial statements made.

The Bodos do not accept the 'so-called Assamese' as aboriginal to Assam because their forebearers were immigrants from Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The Bodos and the Koch Rajbanshis say that, they are the only original inhabitants of Assam. Infact, they do not even recognize the ULFA's demand for an independent Assam. They say

ULFA only represent the Assamese mainstream and has no right to demand for separate Assam which they considered to have been illegally occupied by the 'so-called Assamese.'

The Assamese, who are in constant fear of being reduced in numbers, take up every issue that can justify the fact that they are not losing in their own land. The Assamese nationality has been challenged both by internal and external forces. The reality of such challenges has compelled the Assamese to cling to a new term called 'ethnic Assamese' to distinguish themselves from other groups. It is just another complex issue as to who are really the 'ethnic Assamese?'

4.03 Assam, at odds with the Indian Mainstream

The common belief among the ethnic Assamese families, both Hindus and Muslim is that their origin can be traced to the Indian heartland. The Assamese historically sees themselves as Indian and relate themselves to the 5000 years old Indian mainstream, through its way of life, its religious beliefs, its normative value, Sanskritic origin of its language and the historical epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. In spite of such similarities, it feels that the nationalistic self-representation of the Assamese can be met only in the 'Assamese nation'

- The most adequate way of looking into this complex issue is to look at the region's specific geographical mosaic and the impact of historical pattern. Assam views its independent from the British colonialism did not die away with India's independence but it still remains as a colony of Independent India. This view persist due to many factors, Assam has been rocked by serious destabilisation in its territorial fabric. Its sense of isolation continue to exert influence in the geo-political aspects of interaction. The age-old domination of the outsider on Assam has enhanced serious reaction against the mainstreams.

The predominance of the 'core-periphery' approach of the Indian states has been a severe blow to the development of a common fraternity. The Indian Core constitutes the Hindi speaking Hindu areas and which the national parties predominantly influence. Assam along the other states of North-East are associated with the periphery region. Though, Assam is principally Hindu area, and till mid 80's were governed by the national party. But, its geographical location and growth of regionalism explains its periphery status. The key term which qualify the relationship between the two Core-Periphery are 'power legitimacy, authority, rules, compliance etc. Such relations are formal, mechanical and legal which sprang up because of some historical accidents, but they are sought to be of paramount significance.¹³

Through this politics-cybernetic model of state, the extensive territorial entity of India in nothing but a hierarchy of power centres branching out to a seat of ultimate decision making power. Naturally, command follows down from the centre to the periphery and information travels in the reverse direction.¹⁴

The Assamese seek an independent status against the India Core which has been backed by several reasoning. That, politically, Assam was never a part of the Mughal India. Socially caste institutions does not hold a strong impact and culturally it distinguishes its strong secular Vaishnavite Hinduism from the Hindu culture of the heartland.

Because the communication flow is virtually one way, that is from the dominant to the weaker cultures, the burden of the adverse fall outs of this cross-cultural communication is felt only by the weaker cultures.¹⁵ The Indian mainstream has never developed the normative

¹³ . Sinha, AC; "The Structural Imperatives of the Indian Core and the North Eastern Region" in B. Phakam (ed); *Regionalism in India. With Special Reference to the North-East India*; Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1993; p.129.

¹⁴ . *ibid*; p.126.

¹⁵ . Phanjauban, Pradip; *op. cit.*, no. 6; p.164.

model as opposed to politics- cybernetic model, where there can be an emphasis on the concept of collective consensus of shared values and common heritage of the core and the Periphery. Differences in ties and loyalties between different levels need not displace one another but may co-exist in fraternal relationship because human needs are not just sufficient of impersonal ties like political parties and bureaucratic states. Here, one would like to share the apprehension of a distinguish scholar, "In their eagerness to projects themselves as 'nationalistic' , 'progressive' and 'secular' many social scientist have been condemning the loyalties to such entities as religion, caste, language and region somewhat discriminatory.¹⁶ It is also sufficiently true that regional elite take advantage of these loyalties to fight with the national elite.¹⁷ In Assam, just after the Assam movement, it was an easy win for the regional party AGP to ousted the Congress. But, since the AGP could not solve many disputes. A sense of the Assamese powerlessness gripped the state. Territorial shrinkage and ethnic challenges like tribal assertion assumes, that there is no so-called moderate roads available. It is in this context that ULFA's militant separatist stance found a sympathetic constituency.

4.04 A Quest for *Swadhin Axom*

In the 1980's Assamese subnationalism look a radical turn with the emergence of the United liberation Front of Asom (ULFA).¹⁷ The objective of this outfit is to secede from India and establish a sovereign state of Assam. For the first five years of its existence the ULFA maintained a low profile, concentrating chiefly on building up it's organization, establishing foreign links as well as coordinating with other

¹⁶. Sinha, A.C. op.cit., no. 13; p.132.

¹⁷. The organisation was initially initiated by Pradip Gogoi and Someshwar Gogoi. Though it is commonly assumed that the United liberation front of Assam was a consequence of the Assam Movement, yet actually the ULFA was formed on April 7. 1979. Several founding members of the ULFA belong to the Asam Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP) and had close links with the AASU. Yet unlike AASU, AJYCP was a semi militant organisation holding Marxist and Assamese nationalist views.

militant groups of the region and trying to create a popular base by punishing boot leggers, profiteers and 'anti-social'.¹⁸ The ULFA hogged the limelight with the assassination of *Kalipada Sen*, the President of the Citizen's Right Preservation Committee of Assam and leader of the United Minorities Front.¹⁹ Since then the ULFA did not look back. They have killed many politicians, police officers, army men, businessman, tea garden executives etc. The ULFA had collected several hundred crores from the tea garden management and the businessmen of Assam. They also abducted officers and other prominent personalities to bargain with the government to release their militant activist. Without, going into such details of their action, it is necessary to delve into the psyche of their withdrawal syndrome.

The activities pledged by ULFA is called 'insurgency', terrorism, extremism' or even 'militancy'. There may be little variance in the meaning of the words used but, they all point to the same goal i.e. threat or use of violence by individuals or groups who otherwise have no formal political power. Perhaps the most acceptable definition can be considered as "an extra- constitutional, competitively progressive and variegated struggle launched against the incumbent authority by the consciously mobilised sections of indigenous masses for fulfillment of certain conceptual goals manifesting emancipation."²⁰ The incumbent authority here are the Delhi rulers, and ULFA purports to liberate the Assamese nationality from the yoke of Indian colonialism.

The reinvestment of nationalism in the form of 'Right to Self-determination' in ULFA's discourse is a deconstruction of the dominant self image of being on 'Indian'. ULFA's argument of Indian colonialism

¹⁸. Mishra, Udayon; *The Periphery Strikes Back Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam & Nagaland*; Indian Institute of Advanced study, Shimla, 2000; p.135.

¹⁹ . Husain, Monirul; op.cit; no.6; p.128.

²⁰ . Ahmed, Mohtabuddin and Chowdhury, Prasenjit; *The Turbulent North East*, Akshar Publications, New Delhi; 1996; p.89.

inges upon the disclosure of the modus operandi of Indian capitalism which operates through exploitation of raw minerals and natural resources of Assam.²¹ The sense of deprivation and negligence is mostly found in the periphery region. The different ethnic groups of the North-East has been complaining of being deprived of legitimate share of national wealth and political power which is dominated by the advanced sections. There had been attempts by the dominant group to transform the open-horizontal diversity of the Indian culture into a sharply exclusivist hierarchical diversity.

ULFA struggles to liberate the Assamese nationality and reaffirm the glory and dignity of the Assamese culture. They argue that geographically Assam has been always detached from the Hindustan proper. Right from the pre-colonial times the martyrs of Assam has struggled against Indian domination and ULFA seek to restore Assam's lost independence.

The Assamese identity found a new expression in their hands. ULFA recognises all those who have made Assam as their home as a part of the Assamese identity. Because, to achieve the greater goal of independence, ethnic differences should be kept submerged, so that the main emphasis could be given to fight against the colonial rule of New Delhi. It considers all small and big nationalities residing in Assam as the 'people of Assam'. The reason for this broad stand also associates to its military needs, with Bangladesh Otherwise it is difficult to explain the 15-page booklet issued in July 1992 which is addressed to 'The people of Assam of East Bengal origin'. Tracing the roots of migrants from East-Bengal into Assam, the ULFA document states that the migrants had now become a major part of the national life of the state.²² ULFA

²¹ . Biswas, Prasenjit and Suklabaidya, Chandan; "Shades of Colonialism: Contextualizing ULFA" in Girin Phukan (ed); Political Dynamics of North-East India; South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2000; p.117.

²² . Mishra, Udayan; op. cit., no.18; p. 141.

promises that in the independent Assam tribal communities would enjoy equality of status based on the right to self-determination. However, such statements are not enough to win the tribal confidence, who view ULFA as a chauvinist Assamese middle class organisation.

It is true that the main ideological prop to ULFA's idea of *Swadhin Axom* still continues to come from the Assamese middle class. *Sanjib Baruah* says that ULFA's power is sustained by the Assamese mainstream discourses. It exchanges the 'inter-textuality' of the Assamese nation with the Assamese 'public' and 'private' life. After the anti-ULFA operations by the Indian Army, the editor of the Assamese magazine *Aami (We)*, wrote "ULFA did not drop from the sky, ULFA is our childWe must understand why they have chosen the path of jungle.²³ The acceptance of ULFA's as 'our boy's can be found in numerous conversations of the Assamese mainstream. Bhupen Hazarika's songs like "I salute the river Luit, give puja to goddess Kaamakhya; with your blessings and oath I am off to war."²⁴

The motif of nation as mother draws out the idea of a common womb, which gives the members a shared origin, the river Luit (Brahmaputra) is seen as a symbol of prosperity, the Kaamakhya Temple is the most sacred Hindu temple, the symbol of a common culture. The song echoes to protect of our heritage, persuasion have failed and there are few alternatives but war to avenge the past wrongs.

ULFA also had a strong rural base. It had made efforts to get into the life of the rural people through spending various welfare programmes. Therefore, it has maintained the tradition of Assamese nationalism which has strong middle class peasant nexus. ULFA was born to secure the Assamese peasantry its right over land and for the

²³. Baruah, Sanjib; op. cit., no.1; p.149.

²⁴. *ibid.*

Assamese middle class their rights to business and commerce. The rise of ULFA has given a radical form to the Assamese sub-nationalism, has reached a stage where the formation of the Assamese nationalism is complete. The word 'sub' can be no more qualified because, Assamese nationalism has reached a stage where it posits as an independent survival of the Assamese nation.

But, today their organisation has become very weak. There are some sections within the organisation who have declared their disillusionment with the organisation and instead of '*swadhinata*' talked of '*Swadhikar*' of the Assamese people. The organisation does not stand as strong as before. Many ULFA hideouts are busted, there are some sections who have opted out of the organisation and started collaborating with the state agencies in getting their former comrades gunned down. ULFA also has been in conflict with the AASU, who are not ready to include the 'outsiders' within the ambit of the Assamese identity.

It is also true that even within the Assamese community, their support base has become less compared to the times when anti-insurgency operations were at their peak in the early 1990's. But the hard-core activists who want to make no compromise, they are still strong in their demand for independent Assam. Though, its attainment of an independent Assam may appear quite remote. It still continues to hold the centre stage of Assam's politics.

The Centre has often addressed the whole issue as the 'Assam Problem'. What must be realised is that it is not just fighting a militant organisation but a state of mind. The 'problem' has to be sensed in the pulse of the life of the people. The Assamese who have lived through years of distress, fighting the outsider's domination; or politically bargaining with the national leaders, or trying to compromise on tribal questions and seeing its motherland shrink and divide, they are deeply hurt from inside. The overwhelming mood of the Assamese is that some day Assam

will also have a peaceful co-existence. In tensed situation, the Assamese, especially the rural folks miss their normal life, it has been hard to celebrate *Bihu* in such life-denying environment. The Assamese emotions has been beautifully laid out in Bhupen Hazarika's song which makes a plea to *Bihu* "come and give the Assamese body and mind it's ritual bath."²⁵

4.05: Conclusion

It is not easy to say whether the Assamese identity has got a broader base with ULFA proposition to include all the ethnic communities of Assam. Because, ULFA's support has never have been broad enough to include other then the ethnic Assamese. The immigrant communities fear that Assamese nation has always been a move to expel them. This explains why many immigrant community has seeked alternative sources of likelihood outside the state. Moreover, the AASU, is still pressing for demarcation of 'indigenous' and 'immigrants', stands in between a wall much higher to cross. ULFA's move for unification of not only the plain tribals but also to other separatist organisation like the NSCN to fight against pan-Indianism have received little response. ULFA's call for an united fight are marred by language and religious distinction. Though, these separatist groups may have secret dealings with each other, but ultimately they seek to represent the people who are not to compromise on their self-identify.

When it comes to the identity of the Assamese people, it is not hard to tell that historically the Assamese people have always seen themselves as Indians. ULFA only makes a selective readings of the Assam history. Not to speak of reformer saints like *Sankardeva* for when *Bharatvarsha* was such an important concept and who contributed immensely to bringing Assam within the Indian 'mainstream', even

²⁵ . Baruah, Sanjib; op.cit., no. 1.; p.172.

rebels like *Jyotiprasad Agarwalla* and *Bishnuprasad Rabha*, and literatures like *Padmanath Gohain Baruah* and *Lakshinath Bezbaroa*, behind in Assam's destiny of the inextricably linked with India's²⁶

✓ Infact, the Centre's way of handling the whole situation needs a re-orientation. Military solution cannot be the only way of tackling the problem. It is possible to kill the militants but not the Assamese mind, which is hurt with the sense of deprivation. Unchecked infiltration from across the borders, swift demographic changes, economic backwardness have all contributed towards sustaining the insurgent politics in the region. Though, the Assamese people have reconciled with the fact that the idea of independent India is not a viable concept. But, the Assam leaders often raise the demands for political and financial autonomy. The Assam Gana Parishad election manifesto in 1996 clearly states that they would be fighting for self-rule in Assam.

The solution cannot be found just blaming the Central leaders, our state leaders are even less reliable. The Congress rule in the state had encouraged infiltration for creating vote-banks and even the AGP remained mesmerized by power and money. The people are left astray, not knowing who to confide upon. Every government in rule has just toyed about with the provisions in the Assam Accord. What the Assamese people today needs, is a vital and permanent solution that keeps alive the interest of the people.

The efforts have to be a both-way process. The political centre and the regional sub-centre have not been able to develop a system of shared function. If the Indian nation-state, just seek to sustain support system based on politico-cybernetic model of state power, it can only risk to its future existence. This has to be replaced by a normative approach of building a nation based on a collective consensus of shared values and

²⁶ . Mishra, Udayon; op. cit., no. 18; p.146.

norms. At the same time, it is desirable and healthy tradition to increase a sense of participation, belonging and unity of purpose with regards to the national ideals, values and objectives among the regional sub-centres.²⁷

It has to be realised that the Indian Union does not only belong to the mainstream and the periphery regions are just its supplement. After all, the culture of India cannot be without the culture of the sub-regions. What lacks is a sense of trust, both among the Assamese and the Indian mainstream because one cannot be devoid of the other. The most immediate answer required is how to build this trust.

²⁷. Sinha, A.C; op. cit., no. 13; p.133.

We have come across a whole century of events, an era of immense political importance marked by two distinct periods; the colonial and the post-colonial. There has been significant changes and transition in these two periods. From the autocratic colonial rule we have formed a constitutional democratic government and from the colonial economy we have moved on to market economy. However, the radical nationalistic forces in Assam do not see this transition as real but an illusory vogue. They claim that Assam would be free from the colonial exploitation, only when it has achieved its independence from the rule of Delhi. Its political emancipation is the only recourse they seek for its economic emancipation.

There cannot be denial of the fact, that this region has been most exploited by political pulls and pressures. According to the compulsions of time, Assam had to face the upheavals of partition, territorial fragmentation, migration and demographic flux, economic pressures, social change and cultural dislocation. There has been no easy answer to its burning problems, which have given a good chance to political parties to establish vote banks. As a result of which, Assam lies fragmented, with severe internal conflicts. This dissatisfaction among the people gave ground to the rise of radical nationalistic forces, and an urge for protection of motherland was expressed in the form of 'Swadhin Axom'.

The Assamese began to lose faith in the democratic process because it meant just building up of institutions without its sincere implementation and accountability. An example of such a fruitless attempt has been the passing of the Assam Accord. The Accord

gives a length of promises on the development and protection of the Assamese people. Till date, these measures just lay on papers. The Centre has remained a mute spectator and the leaders at home were busy amassing wealth and power. Many issues that were raised during the signing of the Accord on migration, economic development etc proved to be a futile exercise of debates, just blaming each other. Overall, the measures remained unimplemented.

The study had proposed to understand the Assamese identity, which reads no easy answer. The contemporary Assamese identity is fragmented and dislocated. But has an historical eminence. The expression of identity took strong roots when demographic change, left the Assamese gasping for cultural space. The threat of being a minority in it's own land was a strong cause for the urge of unity with other indigenous groups of Asam. At certain points, during the culmination of the Assam movement in the frame of accord, there was some hope that the Assamese identity would be consolidated. During the movement, all indigenous groups of Assam unitedly stood against the problem. The Accord was meant to be a sacred idea of a strong Assamese identity. Even today it is difficult to say that what do we mean by Assamese identity? Does it count only the ethnic Assamese, or it includes the tribal groups or does it mean 'the people of Assam'.

Today, we see a reversal trend of assimilation, not only among the Assamese from the Indians but also among the Bodos from the Assamese. Such levels of aspirations are closely related to the trend of establishing a dominant power structure. The issue of language was also associated with the India's national movement but after independence, the problem accentuated because language became

an important source of politics. The regional elite uses these loyalties towards language or culture as weapons to thwart the dominance of the national elites. The same applies to the power structure in the state, which is in the hands, of a regional elite representing only the dominant language, or interest and the other sub-groups tend to protest against such dominance.

Explanations for cultural fulfillment in the form of linguistic reorganisation of states have been totally unsatisfactory. Rather, it aggravated the situations increasing group conflicts. The real issue is not of language or culture. Cultural manifestations emanate from economic conflict among various groups. The sense of deprivation is related to their economic backwardness and political representation. The question of Assam's development has been a constant theme in the politics of Assamese subnationalism. It's underdevelopment has been described by the Assamese elite as a 'neglect' of Assam by New Delhi. The separatist militants describe it as a colonial rule of Delhi. The resource management by the Centre is seen as an economic exploitation and the dominance of the mainstream. The Centre had sought to solve this problem by granting enormous grants. This hardly effected the economic development of the region. Because, there is a quick siphoning off the funds with corruption tantalizing it's roots everywhere. Moreover, development is only carried out to the extent it suit the interest of the ruling elite.

Migration also has been the reason for the state of backwardness in Assam. Assam has been facing demographic onslaught for over a century and the scene has not changed much. Migration is not just a mere question of demographic alteration but a matter of foreigner's intrusion into Assam. The influx of

immigrants is co-related with several other issues such as, cultural identity, ethnicity-nationality etc. The general purview is that they are local problems affecting only the people of Assam. This myopic vision accounts for more dangerous aspects, which are being overlooked. The destabilisation of the region has an important bearing on the question of India's national security.

The immigration problem is coupled with the geostrategic importance of the region. Influx of the population from Bangladesh into Assam is a phenomenon associated with the quest for lebensraum. Bangladesh's economic backwardness makes it unable to accommodate its bursting population. The intellectuals of Bangladesh defend that, there should be no reason on why population movement should not be encouraged based on international cooperation. And when India raised the question of deportation, the Bangladesh government denied that there were any Bangladeshi living illegally in India. The political circles in India are not blind to the fact but no effective measures are adopted. This might lead to disastrous strategic results if not checked on time.

The problem is of grave importance to the security of Assam as well as India. There is a need to evolve a national consensus. It is not just a threat to a particular landmass but to the people of the nation. Such national considerations can bring Assam closer and will be easier to understand the problem that it is facing. The Assamese identity is not just facing a threat on the mere question of demographic change but it has significance on constitutional and legal terms. The immigration issue needs to be framed on the question of its legality, as it is a matter of crossing the international border. Therefore, a hard-line national policy is required to combat such situation.

There is a need to have a fair approach on the prospects of integration. The nation-building process which was initiated to carve an unified India has failed to received a positive response. Because, the process of nation-building was only seen in the fulfillment of political aspirations and never supplemented with cultural aspirations. The disjuncture between Assamese subnationalism and pan-Indianism is because of several issues like the policy of migration and it's legality, the cultural protection of subnational identity, and the economic backwardness of the Assam

To bring Assamese subnationalism and pan-Indianism closer, *Sanjib Baruah* has remarkably drawn the idea of a genuine federation building. Based on the principle of federation there can be policies respecting the multiple levels of aspirations. In the process, it will effectively bring about co-ordination and integration rather than just a mere assimilation.

The idea of separate nation exists on the pretext of a separate history and its unique culture. The same cultural apprehension thrives among the other ethnic groups of Assam. Because, there has been no consensus on the question of multi-ethnicity. The groups like Bodos, Rabhas etc. want a further fragmentation of Assam. The Assamese are again rethinking on their cultural programme on how to forge a unity among the indigenous group. Thus, the Asamese are facing a threat of being minority in its own land. Earlier, the Assamese feared that the Bengalis would swamp them. Today, it is because the plain tribals have been disintegrating from them.

The intellectual debates will continue on the question of language, tribal culture etc. What needs to be addressed is the redress of the common people who are the innocent sufferers of

political conflict. The common notion among the Indian people is that the Assamese wants to separate from India. This is because of lack of understanding, towards the region. What needs to be understood is, the problems of Assam are not particular to the state alone, but are a national problem. Both, the Assamese and the Indian people, as well as the other North-Eastern state should understand their importance to India. They are not just a periphery of India but the security heartland of India. If we proceed with this understanding than there is no question on why the Assamese identity and their national aspirations would mean their separate existence.

The uniqueness of Assamese culture and existence is undebatable but it's culture can only be preserved by building a harmonious existence. Our Assamese culture is a synthesis of national tradition and regional ones. The true meaning of Assamese identity will be known as *Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya* said, when we understand the humanitarian aspect of our culture. Terrorism and riots were never a part of our culture. The spirit of our natinalism lies in preserving the beauty of our motherland. As expressed in *Lakshinath Bezbaruah's* song.

“O’ Mor Aponaar Desh
O’ Mor Sikumi Desh
Enekhon Suala, Enekhon Suphola
Enekhon Moromor Desh”

These words mean – O’ My native land, O’ my sacred land, You are so beautiful, You are so bountiful, You are my beloved land.’

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