INTRODUCTION

The object of this present study is to look at the construction of the Assamese Identity during a certain period (1826-1920) of India's colonisation under the British. Categories like 'India' and 'Assam' during this period were still matters of dispute and their cartographical realities still unclear. My aim in this study is to treat the question of identity as a deliberate self-representation which moves towards a definition of the 'Assamese', 'race', 'culture' and 'nation'. My attempt would be to look at how a congeries of historical material written on the Assamese by the British led the Assamese to fashion themselves as historical subjects and therefore participate in a very complex altercation with their colonisers. The theoretical structure of my study is the analysis and treatment of history and the genre of history writing as decidedly "unrealistic". The philosophical formulations of history will be looked into in order to check and clarify the position of such important historical categories as 'facts' 'events' 'interpretation' 'construction' 'the historical imagination' etcetera.

Assam was annexed by the British in 1826 and from then onwards, a very complicated relationship grew between the colonisers and the colonised. I will be looking at how one of the attributes of this relationship was the need on the part of the colonisers, to know and 'fix' the Assamese historically. This emphasis on the fixing of historical
meaning developed into an accumulation of various ‘facts’ about the Assamese. But this was in no way one-sided. The Assamese too, were, under this new yoke, compelled to constitute themselves as historically knowing-subjects. They were instigated through various mechanisms to remember their own history. G.J. Renier says, “Societies have not the same facilities as individuals for the automatic recall of past experience. They have no organic memory that can store experiences and produce them when required. This is why, from time immemorial, men have had to tell each other and their descendants the narrative which keeps these experiences available for comparison as a preliminary to unusual action.”

So as a “preliminary to (the) unusual action” of striving against the British, to prove themselves identifiably Assamese and free, the need arose to use historical memory as an instrument of power. The “telling of” the historical narrative was transformed into a “writing about” those past experiences, which could go into the creation of the Assamese identity.

I felt the need for such a study because, although innumerable mundane histories have been written on the nationalist movement in Assam, I was unable to find any text, which looked at it from the point of view of the philosophy of history, or the possibility of history being a created artefact. I will be looking at history-writing to understand how it can be an exercise in dominance, subservience or subversion. The

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disguised patterns of appropriation, exclusion, representation and interpretation in texts of colonialist as well as nationalist historiographies will be studied meticulously. One question that I wish to problematise in this introduction is the reason why I chose 1920 as the point at which I stop my research. Queries may arise regarding the sacrosanct nature of 1920 in my thesis. Does it mean that the construction of the Assamese identity had completed its tortuous process and by 1920 had crystallised itself into some sort of meaning? Does the identity-making process stop after this year? Do the trajectories of the imagination, so useful in the construction of a national identity, stop moving? The answer is, of course, negative. My first consideration was a pragmatic one. Since I start with 1826, the movement of almost a century would be completed in 1920. The second consideration was historical. Traditionally, British rule before 1920 has been divided into three periods. (i) Under the Bengal Presidency: 1826-1873, (ii) As a new Province, under a Chief Commissioner, but without a legislature: 1874-1905, and (iii) As Eastern Bengal and Assam under a Lieutenant Governor and a Council Government: 1906-1920. I found this division into specific political time-periods useful.

1920 was the year of the Non-Cooperation Movement and, as is generally known, it was successful in creating unprecedented mass-mobilisation and generating unbridled enthusiasm among the people.
Assam too participated in this movement and a new political affinity with the mainland of India was forged. I show in my thesis that culturally, Assam had always existed in a relationship of tension with the Indian heartland. Except in very ancient times, there had been very little contact with the various rulers who had ruled "India". Even the Mughals had been defeated by the Ahom kings. In the nineteenth century, however, in the revolution created by print, Assam's new educated elite tried to create a cultural, heroic past for the Assamese, which had links with the glories of ancient Bhārat, 1920 made this link politically "real". Although Assam's representatives had participated in other earlier political activities like attending Congress Conferences, the ferment, which started in January 1921, was something that had never been witnessed before.

I stop at this point in my work of identity-construction because certain distinctions and definitions become blurred and hazy. The excitement of being involved with Gandhi's politics created a situation of confusion in Assam in so far as the identity making process was concerned. This blurring was primarily because of the tension between what Amalendu Guha calls "Great Nationalism" and "Little Nationalism". "Great Nationalism grounded in a feeling of all-India unity; and little nationalism based on that of regional-linguistic unity. The former
essentially suited to the interests of India's big bourgeoisie; and the latter largely related to the small bourgeoisie - the regional middle classes".  

Although I find the division into great nationalism and little nationalism problematic, I want to use this difference in order to show that there was indeed this marked trend even in the very early days of Assamese nationalism. However, after 1920, these two divergent voices within Assam became more and more cacophonous and this I feel would be outside the purview of my work. The urgent need to create an Assamese linguistic identity can be seen as culminating in the "Oust all Foreigners" agitation of the nineteen seventies and eighties and ultimately in the formation of such separatist groups as the United Liberation Front of Assam.

There are certain issues which I wish to clarify in here, chief, among them being, my use of the word 'history'. Although, I have looked at history as 'History', I have, also tried to frame an understanding of

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2 Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam (1826-1947), Indian Council of Historical Research, Delhi, 1977, p.334. See also Foreword by Ajit Kr. Sharma in Udayon Misra, North-East India : Quest for Identity, Omsons Publication, Guwahati & Delhi, 1988, p.vii. "Real politics in Assam began in 1920, when in the last week of December that year, the Assam Association which was then the only political organization of the Assamese, closed the chapter of playing its moderate role as a loyal supporter of the British Government and adopted the Congress programme of Non-Cooperation. The Assam Association yielded its place to the Assam Provincial Congress. In response to Mahatma Gandhi's call the Assamese youth and peasants joined the struggle to achieve India's freedom and along with it, Assam's freedom within India. This was the end of provincial isolation of the Assamese nationality and the beginning of a new era of its commitment to Indian nationalism as well as of its trust and confidence in the Indian leadership."
history as narrative. In my thesis, I have used various texts, which would not ordinarily have been particularized under the umbrella of history. I took them up to prove my position since these texts told a tale, represented versions of the 'truth' and historiographically enacted the drama of life as they saw portrayed in the minutiae of existence. Therefore gazettes, monographs, ethnographies, journalistic writing, all 'become historical' in the sense that narrative representation can and do transform into forms of knowledge about 'facts' in a certain time and space in history.

Another point, which I ought to explain at the very outset, is my use of the word 'Assamese' in the title as well as throughout my thesis. Assamese stands for the people as well as the language of the people of Assam. But it is the anglicized version of 'asamiya', pronounced ḍɔxɔmiā and is not a word which is used by indigenous speakers of the language. However, since my work includes that period in time when the word 'Assamese' was the standard word used to define the language and the people, I too have kept the earlier usage in order to avoid confusion. But for the Assamese words, which I have retained in my translations for the correct pronunciation of Assamese names, titles of works etcetera, I have

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relied on Golok Chandra Goswami's standard text on phonology for transliteration purposes.⁴

One final clarification deals with my definition of the Assamese middle-class. I have used several terms for the 'middle-class' almost synonymously; for example, 'the Assamese elite' or 'the Assamese intelligentsia'. I wish to explain which classes in Assam were eligible for these terms in the nineteenth century. Two possibilities for the emergence of a new class are (i) through commercial activity or (ii) through the agrarian sector. But the field of commerce was totally controlled by outsiders and there was no scope in the underdeveloped economy to produce a new class from the agrarian sector. What we do actually get in the nineteenth century is a western educated extension of the rural gentry. Most of the men who can be seen to be representative of the nineteenth century Assamese middle-class, belonged to the landed aristocracy, to monasteries or could trace their origins to the Ahom nobility.

In the introductory chapter, "The Construction of History", which deals primarily with traditionalist ideas of history-writing, I look at the status of the category "historical fact" and then go on to analyse how the historical fact is selected, modified, interpreted in order to serve the purposes of the historical imagination. This chapter shows that even in

⁴ Golok Chandra Goswami, An Introduction to Assamese Phonology, Decan College, Poona, 1966.
traditional definitions regarding the writing of history, we see a consensus about the taint that the individual historian's consciousness brings into his writing. The individual historian is also, of course, part of a larger system of values and he cannot escape from the influences of the existing discourse on his imagination.

This takes us to the second chapter, "Representation and Power". I use the theoretical grids of Orientalism and Postcolonialism to show how the question of history and history-writing in colonised nations and its supposed lack led the colonisers to see the native subjects as inferior. This also led to a plethora of writings by the colonisers. In this chapter I show how the power of being able to represent “others” is intimately connected to political, economic and social power. In order to see how the British were framing the Assamese, in the early days of their rule, I will make a very close-reading of A.J. Moffatt Mills' Report on the Province of Assam (1854), so as to see how the discourse of the idle, lascivious, Kâniâ Assamese was being created at various levels: in the prisons, in the educational department, in hospitals and in the administration.

In the third chapter, “The Subjugated Imagination”, I show how the Assamese elite use the new power bestowed by “print-capitalism” to represent themselves. Here, I treat at length, the dichotomy created by the tensions inherent in the Assamese aspiring to merge themselves into a

- addicted to opium
larger, Hindu-India identity. The re-ordering and re-construction of the past by the Assamese intelligentsia in unprecedented ways and also the need to develop and participate in a modernist discourse is the main thrust of this chapter. The problems of gender and caste roles in this new discourse are also studied with a view to know whether the new modern agendas were successful in changing any of the existing equations.

My fourth chapter, "The Politics of Identity" begins with a sub-chapter, which deals with the acceptance of British rule at a social level on one hand and opposition at a political level on the other. I look at the denunciation of the Bihu festival by some among the Assamese elite and the peasant uprising of 1893-94. Starting from 1837 onwards, when Bengali was made the language to be used in courts and educational institutions, I go on to deal with the question of language which was one of the foremost complications in the construction of the Assamese identity. I will see how the lengthy debate on Assamese being a separate language, with a separate identity, literature and history of its own was one of the main issues around which the whole problematic of the Assamese identity was structured. My fifth and final chapter, "Narrating Ambivalence and Identity", looks at the debate regarding the imitation and reinvention of the form of the novel. I will closely examine Rajanikanta Bordoloi's novel, Miri Jiyori in order to see how the identity of the Assamese adivasis of the plains was engineered to fit in with received definitions of 'inferior populations'.