CHAPTER - IV

The Assamese Middle Class and Roots of Assamese Sub Nationalism

Emergence of the Assamese Middle Class

The term middle class is devoid of any concrete definition and different scholars have expressed different opinions on the concept of the middle class. The middle class is essentially an urban concept which had its origin in Europe with the break up of feudalism, followed by the emergence of industrial and commercial bourgeois in the newly developed towns and cities.\(^1\) It emerged in the west basically as a result of economic and technological changes; they were for the most part engaged in the trade and industry.\(^2\) In India on the contrary, it emerged as a consequence of the changes in the system of law and public administration, rather than industrial and economic development. With the consolidation of the British rule, the growing demand for professional and administrative skills created the urban middle class educated on western lines and possessing professional qualification.

In 1898, Henry Cotton, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam while highlighting the defects of the ‘Ryotwari’ system of land settlement pointed out that under the operation of this system of settlement, the Assamese had become a people of petty agriculturist reduced to one dead level of a peasant proletariat, with no substantial middle class which


\(^2\) *ibid.*
acted as a backbone of the nation in more favoured countries, and no upper class on whom they could lean for guidance and assistance during an emergency.\textsuperscript{3} Henry Cotton stated

\begin{quote}
“There are no middle class men who, in the words of Rai Jagannath Barua, Bahadur, in every country in the world always lead the van of progress, enter the learned profession, direct the commerce and trade of the country, man the Civil and Military services, and cultivate the arts and sciences.”\textsuperscript{4}
\end{quote}

Cotton highlighted the fact that there was no class available for furnishing duly qualified employees for the public service and the administration was compelled to fall back for its requirement in large measure on the middle class population of the Surma valley and Bengal.\textsuperscript{5} Thus by the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the Assamese society did not have a strong middle class representation and it was rather in its incipient stages, which however was not the case with the Bengalis of the Surma valley.

The emergence of the Assamese middle class in the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century was one of the permanent and positive legacies of the British rule in Assam. A product of the colonial rule it had no inseparable link with the past, rather they marked rupture with the past.\textsuperscript{6} The Assamese middle class was a formidable social force and being at the top of the social hierarchy, asserted a position of hegemony over smaller ethnic groups of Assam and made attempts to mobilize them into the common platform of Assamese linguistic nationalism. Without an iota of doubt, it can be said that the western educated Assamese

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{ibid}.
\end{flushright}
middle class played a pivotal role in resurrecting the Assamese language and literature, and even enriching it, building various socio-cultural institutions and organizations, to assert the Assamese cultural pride and thereby safeguarding Assamese identity from being eclipsed by the unabated influx of numerous immigrant groups into Assam during the colonial period.

**Genesis of the Assamese middle Class**

Scholars and historians on modern Assam history had made numerous attempts to locate the social roots of the Assamese middle class. They have taken different positions on the issue and this has led to different conclusions where one view is challenged by another counter-view.

Manorama Sharma in her book *'Social and Economic Change in Assam, Middle Class Hegemony'* while trying to locate the social roots of the Assamese middle class stated that one line of the social roots of the Assamese middle class can be traced back to early British revenue officers, the most important of whom were the *‘Mauzadar’* because of their numerical strength, their affluence, and social importance. The other line of these roots can be found in another important social institution of the time, the *Vaisnavite Satras*. Manorama Sharma argues that in the absence of a class of rich *Zamindars*, or a class of merchants who had enough money to take advantage of the new colonial set up, it was the families of the British created high revenue officers like the *Mauzadars* in Assam and the *Satra*- the

---

8 *ibid*, p. 116.
traditional institution of Assam - which had the financial resource to give western education to their children so that they could take part in the colonial administration.\(^9\)

Among the revenue officers, the *Mauzadars* were numerically strong and they mainly belonged to petty officials of the earlier Ahom administration like the Baruahs, Phukans Chalihas, etc.\(^10\) These officials were always conscious of the fact that they must save enough and accumulate some wealth as they were quite unsure about their position as the offices they occupied did not come to them hereditarily unlike the Ahom nobility.\(^11\) By the time the British appeared on the scene, these officials had accumulated enough wealth and they were the natural choice for the post of *Mauzadars* or revenue collectors since they had some amount of wealth which was a necessity, as the *Mauzadar* had to pay the entire revenue due from his *Mauza* by June every year.\(^12\) They received a commission of 10% on the first ten thousand and 5% on the balance of the revenue paid by them and their earnings were therefore quite impressive which allowed them to spend a good amount of it on the education of their children. Thus most of the graduates and the first matriculates came out of the second generation of the *Mauzadars* family.\(^13\)

The next important line of the roots of the Assamese middle class, according to Manoroma Sharma, was the *Vaisnava Satras* as these *Satras* were very wealthy institution, and their source of income were many, and on top of it, many of these *Satras* had a good amount of revenue free grant at its disposal in the form of *Lakhiraj* estates and therefore all the rent paid to the *Satras* in respect of such grants went directly to the *Satras* and not to the

\(^9\) *ibid*, pp. 115, 116.
\(^10\) *ibid*.
\(^11\) *ibid*.
\(^12\) *ibid*, p. 118.
\(^13\) *ibid*, pp. 118, 119, 120.
British. There were other sources of tax like the Guru Kar (tax on the disciples) and some Satras even leased out their land to tea gardens.\textsuperscript{14} With so much of wealth at their command, Sharma argues, these Satras in many cases had helped directly or indirectly many young men to acquire western education and go for higher studies and establish themselves, and thus helping in the emergence of the Assamese middle class and she cites the case of one Debeswar Chaliha of Jorhat who was helped by the Gossain of Dakshinapath to go to Calcutta and study Law.\textsuperscript{15}

Manorama Sharma’s views have been challenged by Rajen Saikia. He offers the explanation that the emergence of the middle class was primarily an urban affair whereas in numerous cases it has been observed that the chief of the Satras and the Mouadars lived out their lives in the village initially, though they may have been attracted to urban centre some time later.\textsuperscript{16}

According to Rajen Saikia, the Mouzadars though were men of position, wealth, and influence but they lived a life a uncertainty. Their influence had wilted. He says that the Mouzadars were the necessary adjuncts of the Ryotwari system and did not give any good account of them.\textsuperscript{17}

The same was the case with the institution of Satras. They suffered immensely during the Moamaria rebellion and the Burmese invasions. Though most of them were

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{ibid}, pp. 128, 129.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{ibid}, p. 130.


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{ibid}, p. 161.
restored during the British rule the *Satras* with their outdated values systems had ceased to be the agent of social and spiritual progress and had become symbols of cultural inertia.\(^{18}\)

He notes that the resources to give western education to their sons and make them qualified to take part in the colonial administration were not limited to these two categories of people alone and were in fact open for a wider section of people.\(^{19}\)

Lastly he observes that the Assamese middle class was the cumulative product of colonial bureaucracy, western education, and tea industry, and the number of educated persons with new ideas, perspectives and aspirations, produced by these three components which was flexible enough to absorb new elements, was far more than those related to the *Satra* and the *Mouzadari* institutions.\(^{20}\)

*The Role of the Tea Industry in the Emergence of the Assamese Middle Class.*

Notwithstanding, the exploitative nature of the tea industry in Assam during the British colonial regime vis-à-vis the immigrant labour force and the discriminatory policies of the government in favour of the European planters, a handful of young enterprising Assamese entered into the production of tea. There can hardly be any doubt that tea was the vital link that connected Assam with global trade and commerce and with the participation of certain young entrepreneurs of Assam in the industry, they took their first lesson in modern trade and made their foray into international trade and commerce.\(^{21}\) Without the tea industry, a stable middle class in upper Assam would not have come into existence with

\(^{18}\) *ibid*, p. 162.

\(^{19}\) *ibid*, pp. 163, 164.

\(^{20}\) *ibid*, p. 163.

\(^{21}\) *ibid*, p. 182.
business links in Calcutta and London.\textsuperscript{22} It would not be an exaggeration to say that the tea industry produced some of the richest Assamese who are remembered not for their huge fortunes but for their philanthropic acts and their association with acts like building of educational institutions, cultural and political organizations and institutions, to protect, preserve and promote the Assamese identity.\textsuperscript{23}

To name a few, Radha Kanta Handique, a successful tea planter set up the first girl’s college of the province, ‘The Handique Girls College’ in Guwahati, and ‘The Chandra Kanta Handique Bhawan’ - the central office of the Assam Sahitya Sabha. He also financed the ‘Chandra Kanta Abhidhan’ a dictionary on the Assamese language. ‘The Narayani Handique Bhawan’ where the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies is housed owed its existence to R.K. Handique.\textsuperscript{24}

Jagannath Baruah, the first graduate from Upper Assam was a tea planter who played a leading role in the formation of the ‘Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha.’\textsuperscript{25} Chandra Dhar Barua, another tea planter and the son in law of Jagannath Barua built the first non government college of Assam, the ‘J. B. College’ in Jorhat.\textsuperscript{26} Siva Prasad Barua, the richest tea planter of Assam in the third decade of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century started an Assamese newspaper ‘Dainik Batori’ which took a strong view on the influx of the Bengali Muslim immigration into Assam during the same period.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{22} ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} ibid, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{25} ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Guha, Amalendu. ‘Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam’s Anti Foreigner Upsurge, 1979 – 80,’ cited in Abu Nasar Ahmed, (edited), Nationality Question in Assam, the EPW Debate, 1980-81, Omeo Kumar Das
Thus the Assamese tea planters with enough financial security and social prestige, mobilized a good amount of their resource, energy, and interest in activities that were meant for the material progress of the Assamese society and culture.

**Western education and the Influence of the Bengal Renaissance**

Progress of education in Assam particularly in the sphere of higher education was very slow during the 19th century. Till the very end of the 19th century, educational opportunities were limited to the high school level and Assam did not have its own college or university. Only children from a few well to do family could afford to send their children to Calcutta for higher studies. Hali Ram Dhekial Phukan, Jadu Ram Deka Baruah, Jajnaram Phukan, Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan, Gunaviram Baruah and a host of others like Haribilas Agarwalla, Ananda Chandra Agarwalla, Ananda Ram Baruah, Lakhminath Bezbaruah and Manik Chandra Baruah, all had their intellectual roots in Calcutta and were the harbinger of modernity in Assam and some of them played a crucial role in the enrichment of Assamese literature. Calcutta was then an intellectual hub, ‘a dynamic centre of learning that gave intellectual stimulation and strength to the educated aspiring youths of Assam who became the bedrock of the Assamese middle class.’ Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan, Gunaviram Baruah, Hem Chandra Barua, Chandra Nath Sarma, and others made remarkable contributions towards the regeneration of Assamese culture and they always kept themselves abreast of the important idea and institutions of nearby Bengal. In this respect, Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan, Gunavi Ram Baruah, Padmahas Goswami and Hem

---

Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, Published by Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2006, p. 80.

Chandra Baruah represented the spirit of the Bengal renaissance in Assam through their various activities in the sphere of the social reform movement in Assam. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan who studied at the Hindu College of Calcutta was a member of the Bethune Society established in 1851, for the cause of women’s education and it was under his patronage that *Jnan Pradayani Sabha* (Society for dissemination of knowledge) started functioning in Nowgong from 1857 – 59.²⁹ Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar’s campaign in Bengal against child marriage and his advocacy of widow remarriage in the 1850’s influenced Gunaviram Baruah and his keen interest in widow remarriage led him to write anonymous articles in ‘*Orunuday*’ and the social drama ‘*Ramnavami Natak*’ in 1857 – 58 (in fact he himself entered into a wedlock with a widow in 1870).³⁰ Padmahas Goswami, of Jakhalabandha Satra, Nowgong, (1829 – 1879) published books in Assamese to popularize the Brahmo movement in Assam.³¹ Hemchandra Goswami wrote a number of anonymous articles expressing his views against polygamy.³²

The development of the Assamese middle class was modeled to that of the Bengali middle class. This was perhaps due to the fact that Assam mainly developed as a hinterland of Bengal economy. Also Assam in the late 18ᵗʰ and early 19ᵗʰ century did not provide any noteworthy illustration of an intellectual tradition and its intellectual output had suffered a great decline since the *Vaisnavite* movement of the 16th Century.³³

---

³¹ *ibid*.
³² *ibid*, p. 216.
Nevertheless, although the emerging sections of the educated Assamese middle class were influenced by the dynamic intellectual ideas and other institutions of Bengal, and the social reform movement, they were not swayed by the Bengali culture or tradition. Rather they used the intellectual output and experience they gained in Bengal to build institutions and organizations that would reinvigorate, protect, and preserve the Assamese identity.

‘The Ryot Sabhas’, ‘The Assam Associations’, ‘The Assam Chatra Samilan’, ‘The Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani Sabha’ which later morphed into the ‘Assam Sahitya Sabha’, and a plethora of other political and cultural organizations which tried to uphold the distinct Assamese cultural and political identity, were modeled on the basis of similar organizations that were functioning in Bengal.

One of the permanent achievements of the Bengali renaissance was the development of Bengali language and literature and similar was the case with Assam where the new awakening of the 19th century largely influenced by the Bengali renaissance led to the reinvigoration of Assam language and literature.34 The educated elite of Assam knew their jobs well and they channelized themselves to prove the linguistic distinctiveness of Assam and introduced different genres of Assamese literature and thereby contributing towards ‘the identity crystallization of the Assamese’.

Another noted public intellectual of Assam Hiren Gohain, in his book ‘Assam, A Burning Question’, makes some interesting observations on the genesis of the Assamese Middle Class –

34 *ibid.*
a) The Assamese middle class is of comparatively of recent origin, trailing at least a hundred years behind its powerful Bengali counterpart.35

b) The Assamese middle class was not formed out of the ranks of the Ahom nobility. The advantage of British education and the new avenues of employment were cornered by caste Hindus who had served the erstwhile Ahom monarchy as their clerks and bureaucrats.36

c) The Assamese middle class was even more of a product of British administration than its Bengali cousins.37 With trade and commerce in the hands of the outsiders, the Assamese middle class had two sources of income – service in a government department, or in the tea gardens, and mauzadari or agency for collection of land revenue.38

d) The Assamese middle class could scarcely hope to match the material resources of the Calcutta gentry, whose leaders waxed fat on the dividends from the comprador transactions and on revenues of permanently settled estates.39

e) Having had to defend its interests, in competition with outsiders, who possess greater financial resources, and more advanced skills in an economy stunted by imperialism, it developed chauvinistic tendencies that continually deflect its legitimate aspirations.40

Monirul Hussain observes that most of the members of the emerging Assamese middle class largely belonged to the Assamese high castes like Brahmins, Kayasthas,
Gonaks, Gossain Mahantas, and few Assamese Muslims, and had their rural links as absentee landlords.\textsuperscript{41} Both Maoroma Sharma and Rajen Saikia agree in at least one point, that the educated middle class elite in Assam had strong rural roots. According to Sharma, whether coming from the Satras or the \textit{Mauzadars}, the Assamese middle class had very strong rural links, because both these sections were rooted in the rural life of Assam.\textsuperscript{42} According to Rajen Saikia, the Assamese middle class were the typical examples of ‘the many formally educated men and women in third world countries who routinely cross the boundary between their traditional village cultures and westernized professional, lives in urban centers, alternating modes of communications, and it seems, personality types as well.’\textsuperscript{43} This rural links were a major factor which allowed the educated middle class of Assam to assert their leadership over issues concerning the rural masses of Assam, be it related to unjust taxation, or the addiction of the opium, or the exploitation of the Marwari \textit{Banias}, at different stages of the colonial period and the rural folks too looked upon them for guidance and help on any issues which mattered to them the most.

In a nutshell it can be concluded that the first generation of the western educated Assamese middle class who went to Calcutta for higher education (because of the lack of facilities for higher education in Assam) belonged to the rich and influential sections of the Assamese society of that period represented by the ‘\textit{Mauzadars},’ petty officials of the erstwhile Ahom monarchy, and those who received generous help from the ‘\textit{Satradhikars}’ as these sections or institutions of the Assamese society had the wherewithal to finance their children’s education in Calcutta. But later when there was a limited extensions of

\textsuperscript{41} Hussain, Monirul. \textit{Assam Movement, Class Ideology and Identity}, Manak Publications, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 49, 50.
educational institutions in Assam by the start of the 20th century, and also new avenues of livelihood opened up, the social base of the Assamese middle class expanded to include in its fold people from humble backgrounds as well from the backward classes. ‘The Assamese educated elite in the mid 19th century and the middle class after that - the most advanced section of the Assamese society acquiring a position of dominance – played a crucial role in the emergence of Assamese national consciousness.’

They occupied a position of dominance in the Assamese society and therefore their perception of the Assamese interest came to prevail in the Assamese society. It is precisely because of this that the social, political, and economic, opponents of the Assamese middle class came to be viewed as the opponents of the Assamese nationalism, and therefore the class interest of the Assamese middle class by and large determines the character of the Assamese nationalism.

---

44 Baruah, Apurba Kumar. Social Tensions in Assam, Middle Class Politics, Purbanchal Prakashan, Guwahati, 1991, p. 25.
45 Ibid.
**Assamese Sub-Nationalism**

The growth and evolution of national consciousness in India since the second half of the 19th Century was ‘simultaneously along two intertwined tracks - one pan Indian and the other regional.’ Great Nationalism or pan Indian nationalism was grounded in a feeling of ‘All India Unity’ and regional nationalism was based on ‘Regional Linguistic Unity’. The former suited the interest of the ‘big bourgeoisie of India’ and the latter was related to the ‘small bourgeoisie’ - the regional middle class.\(^{46}\)

According to Sanjib Baruah the term ‘sub national’ refers to a pattern of politicization and mobilization that meets some of the criterion of nationalism but is not committed to the idea of a separate statehood.\(^{47}\) He also observes that sub nationalism in India stands in a dialogical relationship with pan Indian politics, and points out that

> “If nation and nationalities are imagined communities, sub national narratives are often based on a poetic about a homeland and its people. It is poetics that transform the geography of a region or area into a primal homelike or sacred space and transform a people into collectivity with imagined ties of shared origin and kinship.”\(^{48}\)

According to Baruah ‘Regional nationalism or sub nationalism in India arose simultaneously with and sometime even pre-dating pan Indian nationalism.’\(^{49}\) Typically there were certain common cultural as well as economic factors which led to the growth of

---


\(^{47}\) Baruah, Sanjib. *India against Itself, Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, p. 8.

\(^{48}\) *ibid*.

\(^{49}\) *ibid*. 
sub nationalistic trends during the colonial period all over India and sustain it even at the present times. The cultural foundation of sub nationalism or regional nationalism was the language of a region or the language that was emerging as a regional standard, as well as attempt to maintain the distinctiveness and autonomy of the region, though economic factors too stoked the fire of regional nationalism in terms of competition for government jobs, or domination of the local economy by the outsiders. In fact all these factors were responsible for growth of sub nationalism in Assam and the coming of immigrants from different parts of India and some of them dominating the economy of Assam as well as contesting the Assamese in their cultural and political space had an important role to play in nurturing the idea of regional nationalism in Assam during the pre independence period.

According to Sajal Nag, the dynamics that set the forces of Indian national movement in motion were also responsible for the beginning of the process of nationality formation among various cultural communities inhabiting different regions of the country and the backdrop was capitalism in colonial form for both these parallel processes. He points out that the new mode of production required a unified political territory, homogenous market, and a common language and to achieve this end the British brought about the administrative unification of the country, recognized languages of the major cultural groups they came across first as the official one, and break open the exclusivity and isolation of regions and social groups. While this encouraged development of the relatively advanced cultural groups into nationalities, Sajal Nag states, the backward groups remained suppressed and the advanced nationalities not only spread their socio-political and

---

50 ibid, p. 8.
51 Nag, Sajal. Nationalism, Separatism, Secessionism, Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 1999, p. 120.
52 ibid, p. 121.
economic domination over the backward nationalities, they some time sought to absorb some of these incipient groups into its fold and these groups indeed had to fight out of this domination, resist absorption, and struggle to assert their status.\textsuperscript{53}

Amalendu Guha rightly observes that Assamese nationalism began to take shape in the 1850’s through political mobilization by the nascent Assamese middle class on the language issue, and later on the job and land issue as well. It gradually developed as a comprehensive ideology that underwent organized consolidation during the 1920’s.\textsuperscript{54} Guha argues that ‘it was Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan (1829-1859) who first talked of an ‘Assamiya’ nation and made language the unifying symbol of its modern national consciousness.’\textsuperscript{55} Tilottama Misra observes that the feeling of being swallowed up silently by the alien Bengali culture under British patronage, gave rise to a strong subterranean current of resentment amongst the Assamese people in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{56} The yoking together of Assam and Bengal into one administrative unit from 1826 – 1873, the employment of a large number of Bengali clerks in all the government offices of Assam, and the imposition of the Bengali language on the Assamese people naturally gave rise to the feeling amongst the Assamese of being subjugated not only by the British but also by the Bengalis.\textsuperscript{57} Tilottama Misra points out that the nature of the middle class Assamese

\textsuperscript{53} ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} ibid, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{57} ibid.
nationalism of the 19th Century was defensive in spirit, nourished by a feeling of intense insecurity.\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{Bengali Cultural and Political Hegemony}

In 1836–37, Bengali was made the language of the courts and medium of instruction in the schools of Assam. Assamese historical narrative of the 19th Century typically refers to the period when Bengali was made the official language as a dark period for Assamese language, literature and culture. The earliest assertion of Assamese cultural pride grew as a reaction to the imposition of Bengali language on Assam.\textsuperscript{59} Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan a noted public intellectual of that period submitted a petition to A. J. M. Mills (who came to Assam in 1853 to enquire about the state of administration) where he pleaded for the restoration of the Assamese language in the schools and courts of Assam.\textsuperscript{60} He pointed out that to promote the cause of education in Assam, Bengali must be replaced by the vernacular language of the province as the medium of instructions in the schools i.e. Assamese, and most importantly publication of a series of works on the different branches of the European and native knowledge in the Assamese language.\textsuperscript{61} In fact Dhekial Phukan published a primer ‘\textit{Asamiya Lurar Mitra}’ in 1849, for the benefit of the Assamese children and in his pamphlet ‘A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language And on Vernacular Education in Assam’ published and distributed in 1855, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan

\textsuperscript{58}ibid, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{61}ibid, p. 106.
highlighted the defect of adopting the Bengali as the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam.  

Dhekial Phukan along with the efforts of the American Baptist missionaries ultimately succeeded in 1873, when Assamese was made the medium of instruction in the schools and also the court language Attempts were now made to establish the Assamese on a firm footing and the ‘Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani Sabha’ was formed on August 25th, 1888 by the Assamese students studying in Calcutta inspired by the zeal of national self assertion rather than by purely intellectual objectives. It was in keeping with this objective that two of the members of this organization Kanaklal Baruah and Ramkanta Barkataki prepared a catalogue of Assamese manuscripts and published it from Calcutta in 1897. The ABUS also brought out the monthly journal Jonaki which enhanced the quality of Assamese literature. In 1917 the Assam Sahitya Sabha came into existence and its motto was ‘My Mother Language - My Eternal Love’. The Assam Chatra Sanmilan in its inaugural session on 25th December, 1916, laid down that all business at the conference sessions and otherwise would be conducted in Assamese and if it were not possible to have the presidential address delivered in Assamese, it could be delivered in English only and not in any other language. According to Anuradha Dutta the literary movement in Assam

---

64 ibid, p. 173.
65 ibid, p. 174.
was a movement for the recognition in the cultural field of the distinctive identity of the Assamese people and it was not brushed by the colour of parochialism and chauvinism. 68

Since the Bengali immigrant community was the main beneficiary of the colonial policy of imposing the Bengali language in Assam as it helped them to corner a major chunk of jobs offered by the colonial government, the emerging educated Assamese began to blame these petty officials for influencing the British decision on language. The basis for this belief was an observation made by Miles Bronson, the American Baptist Missionary in Assam whose untiring efforts led to the restoration of the Assamese language in 1873. Supporting the cause of the Assamese language and its restoration in the schools and courts of Assam proper, Miles Bronson, President of the Assamese Community at Nowgong, in 1872 in a letter to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, pointed out the fact that the authorities (pointing to the British Officer in Assam proper) who were objecting to the use of the Assamese language had little or no experience either in the Assamese or the Bengali language so as to perceive the difference between the two and consequently they had to depend in this respect on the knowledge of their subordinates who were mostly Bengalis and who as a matter of course were naturally averse to the use of the Assamese language which was entirely foreign to them in the courts and schools in Assam. 69

In his response on the matter of replacing Bengali with the Assamese as the court language and as the medium of instructions in the schools, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup, Major T. Lamb, pointed out that the ‘Vakils’, Bengalis and the Brahmins found it

68 *ibid*, p. 65.
69 Assam Commissioner, File No. 471, Year - 1862 – 73, Assamese language, *Memorial to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Fort Williams, by the Assamese community at Nowgong*, State Archives, Dispur, Assam, p. 40.
in their own interest to continue with the use of the Bengali language and hence was their opposition to the move to introduce Assamese in the schools and courts of Assam.  

Leading members of the emerging Assamese middle class also subscribed to this view and Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864-1938), an eminent literary figure of Assam, in a satirical essay on the Assamese language titled ‘Asamiya Bhasa’ in the ‘Jonaki’ mocked at the attempts of certain Bengali intellectuals who were propagating a false idea that the Bengali and the Assamese language were in fact same and the British by reinstating the Assamese language was actually trying to create division among the Assamese and the Bengalis.

In 1917, addressing the first session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, Padma Nath, Gohain Baruah, its president, alleged that ‘a group of selfish Bengalis living in Assam stood on the way and bluffed the British officers and through them put Bengali on the saddle.’

Prior to the formation of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, Hem Chandra Goswami one of the founders of the ‘Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani Sabha’ wrote an essay during the 2nd session of the Sabha. To quote the relevant portion from Goswami’s essay ‘Asamiya Bhasa’

“The British are foreigners, what do they know? They have just entered Assam; they know nothing about the customs, traditions, practices and languages of the

---

70 Assam Commissioner, File No. 471, Year - 1862 – 73, Assamese language, Letter No, 227, dated, 28th June, 1872, p. 45.
people. And they know that Bengalis are better educated than the Assamese. So depending on the advice of the Bengalis looking for clerical jobs, they (the British Rulers) banished Assamese from the courts and replaced it with Bengali in 1936.”

Satyendra Nath Sarma, noted literary historian of Assam observed that for their non selfish interest the Bengali clerks convinced the English officer’s that Assamese was not an independent language, rather it was vulgar dialect of the Bengali language and relying on their information the alien rulers drove the indigenous language from the schools and courts of Assam.

Nanda Talukdar, another important Assamese literary figure was of the same view that “the banishment of the Assamese language was the result of a conspiracy of the Bengali clerks.”

Birinchi Kumar Baruah, an eminent literary personality of Assam notes that it was under the influence of these men recruited mostly from Bengal, that the British government made Bengali the language of the court and medium of instruction in the schools of Assam.

Dimbeswar Neog, an Assamese writer of repute notes that Bengali usurped the place at the instigation of the Bengali clerks who came to Assam for their living.

Apurba kumar Baruah is of the opinion that the early British officials position on the language issue might

---

74 ibid.
75 ibid.
76 ibid.
have been influenced by the dominant Bengali views of that period that held that Assamese and Oriya are dialects of Bengali.\textsuperscript{78}

It must be noted that William Robinson who was the Inspector of Schools of Assam proper when Bengali was made the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam was of the opinion that a great portion of words used in Assamese and Bengali were identical, distinguished only by a slight difference in pronunciation.\textsuperscript{79} A number of British officials like Colonel Francis Jenkins (he in fact claimed that he was the one who was mainly responsible for the introduction of Bengali) and others particularly the Deputy Commissioners and Assistant Commissioners of the various districts of Assam proper, whose opinions were solicited on the question whether to retain Bengali language or replace it with Assamese as the court language and the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam in 1872 – 73 by the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, subscribed to this point of view.

The Assistant Commissioner of Barpeta, A. C. Campbell, then a part of the Kamrup district stated that Assamese was mere a colloquial dialect of the Bengali language which had few distinctive features from the Bengali language.\textsuperscript{80} As regards to introducing Assamese in the schools of Assam, he drew the attention to the fact that even the best advocates of the ‘dialect’ thought that Bengali was indispensible for the higher classes.\textsuperscript{81}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[80] Assam Commissioner, File No. 471, Year - 1862 – 73, \textit{Assamese language}, Letter No, 134, dated, 19th June, 1872, p. 46.
\item[81] \textit{ibid}.
\end{footnotes}
He could not understand the logic of teaching the students in the elementary classes in a language ‘what they must unlearn in the higher classes….’

Whosoever was responsible for the imposition of the Bengali language, it ultimately resulted in creating animosity between the indigenous Assamese and the Bengali immigrants over the issue of language and the matter did not end even with the restoration of the Assamese language in 1873. This was mainly due to two reasons - addition of Bengali populated areas into the newly created province of Assam and constant immigration from Bengal throughout the colonial period and even beyond. Amalendu Guha refers to the newly organized province of Assam from 1874 – 1947, as ‘an amalgam of Assamese speaking, Bengali speaking and myriad tongued hill tribal areas, in which Assamese (Asamiya) was the claimed mother tongue of less than a quarter and Bengali of more than 40% of the population.’

The second factor responsible for the never ending schism between the two communities was the fact that an influential section of the Bengali immigrants residing in Assam and even intellectuals in Bengal ‘occasionally engaged in ‘vituperative broadsides’ against the Assamese language which were published in prominent Bengali journals of the 19th century like Mrinmaye, Prabasi, and Bharati.

In 1898, in an anonymous article published in the Bharati, titled as ‘Bhasa Bicched’ written by a Bengali intellectual (whom Lakshminath Bezbaruah later identified as none other than Rabindra Nath Tagore), the author argued that Oriya and Assamese were two

---

82 ibid.
dialects of Bengali and then it was the divide and rule policy of the British which was responsible for creating the painful separation between Bengali and these dialects of Assam and Orissa. In reply to this article, Lakshminath Bezbarua quoted extensively from the relevant writings of different writers and linguists like Max Muller, R. N. Cust, E. A. Gait, and Sir George Abraham Grierson, to show that it had been finally and irrevocably proved that Assamese language had always existed as a distinct language with an independent heritage of its own.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri while observing on the language issue in his book ‘A Continent of Circe’ remarked

“The mongoloid Ahoms only demonstrated the general law afresh. They had accepted Hindu culture from Bengal, and none but a madman will say that their language is not a dialectical off shoot of Bengali. Even their war cry is corrupt Bengali. But in recent years they have developed a very strong sense of a Assamese collective personality. With that they have also acquired a violent hatred towards Bengali who brought them into the fold of Hindu civilization if not civilization itself.”

Not only the Bengali elites of Bengal resorted to such views but leading Bengal residents of Assam also contributed their ‘mite’ which in turn led to the growth of anti Bengali sentiments in Assam: Jogesh Chandra Rai, a Bengali professor of Cotton College, Guwahati, wrote a series of articles in ‘Mrinmayee’ and ‘Prabasi’ where he again reiterated

85 *ibid*, p. 163.
86 *ibid*.
the same notion that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali and ‘Prabasi’ continued to publish a series of letters, articles, reports which had an ‘anti Assamese tinge’ to it.\textsuperscript{88} Lakhminath Bezbarua mentions that in one such article in ‘Prabasi’ the Assamese were referred as non Bengali residents of Assam implying that Assam was a homeland of Bengalis and the Assamese were just another community living in Assam.\textsuperscript{89} Professor Padmanath Bidyabinod of Cotton College, in his presidential address at the session of the Uttar Banga Sahitya Samilan, tried to establish that there was practically no difference between the written language of Assam and the Bengal but modern Assamese scholars were trying to establish the distinct identity of the Assamese language by deliberately using colloquial idioms in their writings and avoiding using words of Sanskrit origin which were identical with the Bengalis.\textsuperscript{90}

These anti Assamese activities of the Bengali residents of Assam even turned several Assamese admirers of Bengal and Bengali culture against them (the Bengalis). Boli Narayan Bora while criticizing his Assamese compatriots for nurturing anti Bengali feelings admonished the Bengali community of Assam at the same time and observed that they are also at the root of the dispute as Bengalis think of Assamese as uncivilized and they do not learn Assamese, for they think that it is the language of the uncivilized people.\textsuperscript{91}

Lakshminath Bezbarua even appealed to the Assamese youth to shun the Bengali journals like the plague and to subscribe to English and Assamese magazines and he

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{ibid}, p. 167.
\textsuperscript{90} \textit{ibid}, p. 168.
observed that by contributing standard articles to the Assamese journals, the Assamese could raise the standard of these journals and bring them to the level of foreign journals.⁹²

Prafulla Chandra Roy, an ex-president of the Bengali literary conference while presiding over the Tezpur Session of Assam Chatra Sammilan, in 1919, said that the controversy about the independence and identity of the Assamese language was due ‘to the provincial patriotism and national conceit of the Bengali’s living in Assam.’⁹³

The ‘Assam Domiciled People’s and Settler’s Association’ (Established, in 1935 and renamed ‘Assam Citizens Association’ in 1940 - 41) constantly stressed that the Assam valley, not to speak of Assam as a whole, was a bilingual region and tried to forge an alliance if possible with the Bengali Muslim settlers on common issues like protection of their language.⁹⁴ The Association was “permeated with a spirit of challenge to the unilingual concept of the Brahmaputra valley...”⁹⁵

The Amrit Bazar Patrika itself reported on November 20, 1935, that the Bengali residents of Assam assembled in a huge meeting and resolved

“The brain of the 5.5 lakhs of Bengali speaking Hindus, the wealth of the 20,000 Marwaris, the great labour force (6,00,000 ex tea garden coolies) of Biharis, the agricultural instincts of 5.5 lakhs of Bhatia immigrants, the martial spirit of 3,000 Sikhs, 1, 40, 000 Nepalis and other settlers, if united together, these settlers would surely rule the country. The Assamese leaders must live

⁹⁴ Political History of Assam, File Number - 12, Year 1938, Subject : The Assam Domiciled People’s and Settler’s Association, State Archives, Assam. Also see Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, p. 173.
⁹⁵ Guha, Amalendu. Planter Raj to Swaraj, p. 211.
here on the terms of the Bengali settlers who have already flooded the province."\textsuperscript{96}

The caste Hindu Bengalis as well as the Muslims of the Surma valley were inimical of every thing that was in the interest of Assam. For instance on the question of a separate University for Assam, in 1936, the Bar Association at Sylhet submitted its report which stated that that a separate University for Assam was not only absolutely unnecessary but was also a costly luxury to a bankrupt province where the material for even a poor type of a University ‘are hardly available at present.’\textsuperscript{97}

The Report added that the idea of a separate University for Assam though undoubtedly a fascinating one, especially in view of the coming autonomy under the new constitution, owes its origin not to any bona fide motive on the part of its protagonists for the spread of education but to the clamor of the Assamese speaking people who amount to hardly more than 22 percent of the population of the province of Assam.\textsuperscript{98}

In the early decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, when both the provincial and All India Nationalism inspired the Assamese into action, the inherently conflicting aims and aspirations of the Bengalis and the Assamese came to the surface as the Hindu Bengalis of the Brahmaputra Valley feared that Assamese nationalism might lead to give Assam an Assamese public face.\textsuperscript{99} Thus when the Assamese leadership decided to join the freedom struggle under the Indian National Congress, the Hindu Bengali settlers of the Brahmaputra

\textsuperscript{98} \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{99} \textit{ibid}, p. 38.
Valley took the opposite course of exhibiting their unstinted loyalty to the foreign imperialism.\textsuperscript{100}

Basant Kumar Das, from Sylhet moved a resolution in the Central Legislative Assembly for changing the name of the province of Assam as according to him the existing name mistakenly made the Assamese feel as if the province belonged to them.\textsuperscript{101}

Prominent personalities of Bengal subscribed to the Bengali scheme of ‘Greater Bengal’ comprising Bengal, the whole of Assam and parts of Bihar.\textsuperscript{102} In 1944, Professor Humayun Kabir private secretary to Maulana Azad wrote

“One can easily visualize a Bengali state, comprised of about ten million people and living in a compact area. Such a state would include the present administrative province of Bengal and some of the outlying districts in Assam and Bihar. In fact the province of Assam may be wholly incorporated in it. Cachar and Sylhet in the Surma Valley and Nowgong and Goalpara in the Assam Valley are Bengali majority districts. There can hardly be an Assam if these districts join Bengal.”\textsuperscript{103}

Such attitude only strengthened the anti Bengali bias of the Assamese. One can assume that the Bengali ‘Babus’ during the period when Bengali was the official language entrenched themselves in several administrative jobs in Assam and their position seems to be challenged as a result of re-introduction of the Assamese language both in the schools and courts of Assam. Thus a sense of job and economic insecurity might have prevailed

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
upon the Bengali immigrants to resort to the anti-Assamese activities. Added to it was the fact that the leadership of the East Bengali migrants under the banner of the provincial Muslim League threatened not only the cultural and economic spaces of the Assamese but even its distinct political identity. Leaders like Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasami, Abdur Rouf, Munawar Ali, Abdul Matin Chaudhury pointed out that the East Bengalis immigrants were forcibly assimilated with the Assamese language by not allowing them to use their own language, if they wanted land in Assam.

These activities made the Assamese middle class view the Bengali immigrants as a serious threat to their linguistic, cultural and political identity. Certain common demands of the political activists of Assam and other socio political organizations like *The Assam Sahitya Sabha*, *The Assam Samrakshini Sabha*, therefore were

1) Transfer of Sylhet to Bengal, 2) Total ban on Bengali immigration to the Brahmaputra valley for a period of 20 years, 3) Strict naturalization laws for resident Bengali immigrants, 4) Outlawing of all anti-Assamese organization in the Brahmaputra valley, 5) the exclusion of the planter bloc from the legislature and a 10 year moratorium on agricultural indebtedness.\(^\text{104}\)

It would not be wrong to say that the Assamese socio cultural organizations were more focused in gathering a strong numerical majority for the Assamese language and hence they tried to co opt both the East Bengali Muslims and tea garden coolies to assimilate with the Assamese language. To cite one instance in 1936, during the Budget session in the Assam Legislative Council, Jogendra Nath Gohain pointed out that if

---

immigration of the East Bengali Muslim was to continue in Assam, then they and their children must accept the Assamese language as their mother tongue as well as the vernacular in the schools.\textsuperscript{105} Even Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury and Nilomoni Phukan representing the \textit{Assam Samrakshini Sabha} in their petition to Jawaharlal Nehru told that the \textit{Mymensinghias} (East Bengali Muslims) were ready to accept the Assamese language but were prevented by the Muslim leaders as well as the Bengali Hindus in doing so.\textsuperscript{106}

\textbf{Economic Dominations of the Immigrant Community}

There was a tendency among a class of British officials starting from Major Francis Jenkins to Henry Cotton to blame the Assamese for their lack of initiative and foresight to compete with the migrants groups. Some of the common refrains were; that the Assamese were a lethargic lot, disinclined to work hard and there was an utter want of an industrious, enterprising spirit, and a general degeneracy of the province. They wondered how a resource rich province like Assam blessed with fertile soil and which abounds in valuable products of great commercial value could be inhabited by a class of people who are indolent and averse to hard work. For instance, Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam in 1898, remarked that although the natural fertility of Assam was so great and the amount of land available for cultivation was so vast that there was no danger of the Assamese peasantry falling below their present condition of rural respectability, there was no prospect of their ever rising above it.\textsuperscript{107} Each man cultivates as much as he requires for

\textsuperscript{105} Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1936, The Assam Gazette, Part, VI, 1936, Published by Authority, Shillong, 1936, p. 297.
\textsuperscript{106} Guha, Amalendu. \textit{Planter Raj to Swaraj}, p. 208
his own needs, and no more. During his tour of Assam in 1943, Lord Wavell remarked the natives Assamese were lazy and likely to be ousted by more pushing but less attractive Bengali Muslims. B. C. Allen remarked “The Assamese have no commercial aptitude and the natives of Sibsagar have allowed the whole of the profit of the wholesale and a large portion of the retail trade to be absorbed by the foreigners”, i.e. the Marwari.

The educated section among the Assamese initially too subscribed to the view that immigration was essential to develop the resources of Assam and this could be discerned from the views of Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan, Gunavi Ram Baruah and others. Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan, one of the earliest luminary of the Assamese middle class subscribed to the idea that in order to provide against famine and similar other misfortunes, as well as to improve the agriculture of the country, the government could bring out from Europe and Upper India a sufficient number of men well versed in the art of agriculture to teach the people the better management of their farms and to instruct them to cultivate every variety of valuable products.

Colonial administrative and economic policies in Assam were driven by the two objectives: maximum collection of revenue and thorough exploration/exploitation of the resources of Assam. Migration was considered essential to aid them in realizing these objectives and hence these migrants were offered various incentives which helped them to gain a firm footing on the economy of Assam at the cost of the indigenous population. Industrialization and urbanization had a limited spread effect and touched mostly the

108 ibid.
immigrants. The income generating avenues bought about by industrialization and the opening up of Assam’s economy had seen a very small presence of the indigenous Assamese and the opportunities created by the economic restructuring of Assam were grabbed with full hands not by the Assamese/indigenous groups but by the myriad migrant communities that flocked into Assam, post 1826. The Bengalis (caste Hindu) dominated the administration and other elite professions, while the Marwaris had the entire internal trade under their grip, Tribals mainly from the impoverished regions of India were the main labour force in the tea industry and by developing the jungles and swampy lands, the East Bengali Muslim held under their control the production of commercial crops like jute, the Nepalis acted as herders, rubber tappers and cultivators.

As a whole economic transformations since the annexation of Assam to the British Indian Empire in 1826 did not yield any real substantial material benefits to the indigenous Assamese. The average Assamese peasantry languished in poverty due to exacting land revenue demands, opium excise policies, limited market growth, destruction of the handicraft and handloom and other related cottage industries, and last but not the least due to the vice like grip of the Marwari traders cum money lenders over the peasants. Monetization of revenue, lack of institutionalized credit facilities, and penetration of merchant capital into the rural economy of Assam, were the major factors that pushed the peasantry into a state of bondage to the Marwari Mahajan

“The Industrialization of Assam during the British Rule led to a rise in export of primary commodities. There was absence of any structural change to induce complementary growth in other sectors and institutional changes to diffuse
gains in the real income of the masses. In the dualistic economy of the colonial system, pockets of prosperity were created amidst a stagnant economy.”

Thus there was a ‘distortion in the development of Assam in a manner that served the imperial British economic belt, while Assam’s peasant economy underwent deindustrialization and stagnation.” The plantation economy subjugated to foreign capital and linked with immigrant usury and merchant capital could not bring about a radical transformation within the local society itself.

In fact an important fact to be noted is that most of these migrants including the European planters, the Marwaris, the Sindhis, and Kabulis and to some extent tea garden labourers etc were semi permanent in nature - where the inhabitants of one place earn their living in another but maintain connection with their own home and ultimately return there. This led to a situation where the migrants earned their income in Assam and remitted a good amount of the same back to their place of origin. The gap between the income stream accrued and the income disbursed within the province increasingly widened. Not only was the extracted surplus reemitted to Britain (planters and officials) in the form of fabulous high dividend and individual savings from inflated pay packets, (and same was the case with the Marwari traders who remitted their surplus gained through trade and usurious activities back to their native state in Rajputana), but also a part of the hard earned wage bill was remitted outside the province by the immigrant labourers.

---

114 Ibid.
115 Guha, Amalendu. Planter raj to Swaraj, p. 32.
The state did not provide any incentive or encouragement to the age old cottage industries of Assam like the silk weaving and bell metal industries. In fact these industries were pushed into the periphery by imported manufacturing goods and whatever little remained of those industries, it too went under the control of the Marwari merchants. Lacking in capital and enterprise the indigenous Assamese failed to take advantage of the new ventures and whatever little they saved was invested on the education of their children so that they could be transformed into human capital and sustain themselves with minor jobs doled out by the colonial administration.\footnote{Goswami, Priyam. \textit{Op.cit}, p. xv.} However here too the openings were limited and competition from the immigrant Bengalis was intense both from Sylhet and Bengal.

To put things in perspective, a good number of the jobs generated as a result of the new ventures created during the colonial regime did not attract the indigenous Assamese mentally or physically, and perhaps this was the prime reason that the Assamese peasantry despite the numerous pressures exerted upon them by the British authorities through frequent enhancement of land revenue or monopoly of the opium sale, did not move into the tea garden to work as wage laborers as they considered those job beyond their dignity. The main economic concerns which agitated the minds of the Assamese were on issues of government employment, settlement of waste lands, and to a certain extent trade.
The Issue Of Settlement of Waste Lands: Clash with the East Bengali Muslim Immigrants

Initially there was hardly any clash between the indigenous people with the East Bengali Muslim migrants on the issue of land settlement as the Assamese had as much land as they wanted to cultivate, what was lacking were capital, state support in the form of incentives, labour force, and modern agricultural tools and technology. Also there was the fact that these East Bengali migrants in the initial stages set their eye on the forest land or lands adjacent to the river Brahmaputra and it must be admitted that the Assamese were not interested in cultivating these lands. But problem arose when these immigrants moved away from these tracts and started encroaching on areas which were hitherto closed to them like the submontane areas which were inhabited by the tribals and backward classes. The Line System was put in place to confine the settlement of the immigrants in certain areas but it hardly functioned in the due to corruption among the revenue officials. Within a short time the issue of settlement of waste land in Assam became one of the major points which led to a conflict of interests between the indigenous people of Assam and the immigrant East Bengali Muslims. This issue had acquired a serious dimension during the second and the third decade of the 20th century and since then had remained the sore point in the relationship between the indigenous sections of the population particularly tribals and the immigrants. In 1925, an attempt was made by Rohini Kanta Hati Baruah when he moved a resolution in the Assam Legislative Council recommending that ‘all available waste lands in Assam must be settled with the Indians but for the next five years, preference must be given to the Assamese…’ The resolution did not specifically targeted the East Bengali Muslims but both the European tea planters and to a certain extent the East

Bengali Muslims.\textsuperscript{118} However a member from Sylhet, Khan Bahadur Allauddin proposed further amendments to the resolution which frustrated the real objective of the original resolution as it stated that waste land in this province should ordinarily be settled with the ‘natives of the province for special and ordinary cultivation with a view to encourage agriculturists by small capitalists of this province without hampering the claims of the immigrants.’\textsuperscript{119}

On 17\textsuperscript{th} August, 1927, in the Assam Legislative Council, a resolution was moved by Mahadeb Sharma. The resolution briefly read

“This Council recommends to the Government of Assam, with a view to prevent or restrict, the settlement of waste lands in the province with the immigrant from the other provinces and foreigners, a committee with an unofficial majority be appointed to enquire and report from every district.

(a) Available waste lands at present for settlement.

(b) The desirability of reserving adequate areas of waste lands for further development separately in every district in view of population.

(c) Whether the existing areas of game reserves, fuel reserves and grazing reserves should be increased or decreased in view of people’s demand in every district.”\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, p. 1395.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid, p. 1437.
\textsuperscript{120} Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1927, The Assam Gazette, Part VI. 1927, Published by Authority, Shillong 1927, p. 1084.
This resolution was lost as both the Europeans and the Muslim members of the council voted against it. The resolution was the last legislative attempt by any Assamese political representative to control and regulate settlement of waste land with the immigrants in the pre independent era. (Debates on both these resolutions are discussed in detail in the Chapter on East Bengali immigrants).

On 20th September 1928, during the discussion on the colonization scheme in Nowgong district, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi urged the government to reserve enough suitable waste lands for the future expansion of the existing population. It must be mentioned that the government did take some administrative measure in the form of the Line System and the Colonization scheme to confine settlement of the immigrants East Bengali in certain definite areas. But these were not foolproof measure, and encroachments of immigrants in tribal areas and grazing reserves went on in small scale which acquired a serious dimension during the Grow More Food Campaign of the Saadulla ministry in 1942 - 43.

In fact with the ushering of provincial autonomy in 1935, the Muslim League leaders in Assam began to take a communal stand on the issue of the Line System asking for its abolition in 1936 and in 1937 by passing a resolution against it in the Legislative Council and the Assembly which led to the appointment of the Line System Committee. After the resignation of the Congress led Gopinath Bardoloi ministry in 1939, the Line System was put in cold storage though it was not abolished and immigrant were allowed settlement in

---

121 Assam Secretariat, Revenue Department, Revenue - A, September, 1929, Colonization Scheme in the district of Nowgong, Shillong, 1929, p. 13.
122 Memorandum on Assam Waste Land and Immigration Policy, 1943, Assam Secretariat, Revenue Department, Development Branch, RD 23/43, 1943, Appendix, IV.
areas which were previously closed to them. Apparently the argument for land settlement with the immigrants from Bengal was always based upon either on considerations of development of the province or humanity as was the case in 1943 during the great famine of Bengal but humanitarian considerations were only a camouflage to hide the real intention of the Muslim League leaders in Assam which was to inflate the number of the Muslim immigrants in Assam by allowing them settlement of land without any control or regulation and make Assam a Muslim majority province so that it could be included in Eastern Zone of Pakistan. This was in fact confirmed by the remarks of Lord Wavell who remarked that the government headed by Muhammad Saadulla was not that much interested in the Grow More Food campaign but in increasing the Muslim population through immigration. It was alleged that the Revenue Minister Munawar Ali under the Saadulla ministry in his speech in the Muslim League Council meeting held at Gauhati in 1945, had assured the conference that if he could remain the revenue minister for another 2 years at least, he could convert Assam into a Muslim majority province. Thus an economic issue was blatantly communalized by the political leadership of the Muslim League and the results were disastrous as it sowed the seeds of a never ending distrust between the immigrants and the indigenous although the immigrants might have arrived in Assam in the hope of getting land in Assam rather than helping these leaders in dragging Assam to East Pakistan.

The indigenous response to these challenges could be gauged from the following remarks made by some of the political leaders of Assam. In their note of dissent, three

members of the Line System Committee, 1938, Rabi Chandra Kachari, Kameswar Das, and Sarveswar Barua, wrote that

“….we look upon the Assam valley as the home of the Assamese people - who have got a vested interest in the soil of these districts - which they successfully defended against the hordes of invaders in pre British days. If they had the sovereign power today they would have still resisted occupation of the land here by outsiders against their will by armed forces if necessary….”125

In 1945, during the budget session, Sarveswar Barua while criticizing the land settlement policy of the Saadulla government observed that although the Assamese people including the tribals are the natural owners of the Assam valley districts which they had defended as their hearth and homes in the pre British days against hordes of invaders from Bengal, now they are themselves in a precarious position as their own government have allowed the progeny of those invaders to occupy their land, by coming in huge numbers without any check.126

Issue of monopoly of Government employment by the Caste Hindu Bengalis –

As early as 1852-53, Maniram Dewan an indigenous tea planter and an Ahom noble who assisted the British in consolidating their rule over Assam submitted a petition to A.J. Moffat Mill who travelled throughout Assam to submit his magisterial report on the province of Assam. Maniram Dewan submitted his petition on behalf of the Ahom royalty and aristocracy. He complained that under the arrangement for revenue collection even

126 Debates of the Assam Legislative Council, March Session, Volume IX, No. 1, 1945, p. 203.
when a number of local Assamese were not suitably employed “inhabitations of Marwar and Bengalis from Sylhet were being appointed as Mouzadars (Revenue collecting officials) and ‘for us respectable Assamese to become ‘ryats’ (tenants) of such foreigners is a source of deep mortification.”

In matters of government employment, the Bengali caste Hindus had the natural advantage over the indigenous Assamese to seize the opportunity of grabbing a lion’s share of the administrative jobs and this was firstly, due to the imposition of the Bengali language as the court language as well as the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam, and secondly, due to the fact that Bengal and even the district of Sylhet had a relatively superior educational infrastructure in place and thirdly, because of Bengal’s early exposition to the British rule and western oriented education.

The progress of higher education in Assam was quite slow and till 1901 there was not a single institution of higher learning in the Brahmaputra Valley and only the well to do among the Assamese could aspire for higher education and go to Calcutta for higher studies. The efforts of Manik Chandra Baruah and others and last but not the least the then Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton led to the establishment in 1901 of the Cotton College - the first institute of higher learning in the entire North East Region.

The Barak valley along with the district of Sylhet which was joined with Assam in 1874 was much more advanced and had a huge number of English educated Bengalis who were ready to fill the administrative jobs in Assam to the exclusions of the Assamese.

128 Guha, Amalendu. Planter Raj to Swaraj, p. 47.
Perhaps that was one of the reason why a section of the Assamese middle class always demanded the separation of Sylhet from Assam because of the stiff competition they encountered from that district in matters of administrative jobs.

The issue of over representation of the Bengalis particularly from Sylhet in matters of government employment in Assam was raised in several public platform including the Assam Legislative Council and Assembly. In 1936, Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri, drew the attention of the Assam Legislative Council towards the fact that Sylhet caste Hindu Bengalis were represented overwhelmingly in various government departments and he cited the case of one such department – the Audit Department - where caste Hindu Bengalis were represented more than their allotted due share.\textsuperscript{129} On November 25, 1936, Sarveswar Barua moved a resolution in the Assam Legislative Council which stated

“…That in future all provincial gazetted appointments be distributed as between the natives of the Assam valley districts, the Surma valley districts, and the Hill districts on the basis of the number of such posts in each departments required for each of the above divisions.”\textsuperscript{130}

In moving this resolution he cited the following reasons

“That a few higher appointments in the provincial and subordinate services in the province were highly prized posts and that there was a keen rivalry for them

\textsuperscript{129} Proceedings of The Assam Legislative Council, 1936, The Assam Gazette, Part VI, 1936, Published by Authority, Shillong, 1936, p. 15, (Question was asked by Rohini Kumar Chaudhury and the reply was given by W. L. Scott)

among the natives of both the valleys and also between the different communities….”

Thus a rush to grab the limited livelihood opportunities offered by the British in the shape of government jobs was one of the main irritant in the relationship between the Assamese and the Bengali Hindu migrants.

Trade

So far as trade was concerned, the Assamese were mute spectator and silent victims to the fact that their internal trade and commerce had gone into the hands of the Marwari traders. This was inevitable because the Marwaris were an astute trading class. There was absence of local business acumen in Assam during the pre colonial period and even after it. The Marwaris were experts in entrepreneurial activities and had built up a network of trade and finance throughout north India, which helped them to carry on with banking and money lending activities besides trade. It must be pointed out that the Assamese peasantry too was dependent upon these Marwari traders for credit and supply of opium and they were also the main link between the products of these peasants and artisans and the market. Protests against the Marwari’s domination of trade came from those sections of the Assamese society who tried their hand in trade and commerce but failed to compete with the Marwaris. Kamalakanta Bhattacharya who tried his hand in rubber trade but failed was one of the earliest Assamese nationalist to raise his voice against the usurious exploitation of the Marwaris and Jnananath Bora lamented the loss of trade and commerce to the Marwari and also the fact that the Assamese were indebted and subordinate to these ‘foreigners’.

\[131\] ibid, pp. 1548.
A small number of aspiring Assamese youth with entrepreneurial spirit did try their hand in various business activities including opening up of tea gardens. But they had to face a lot of discrimination as against the European tea planters as was the case with Maniram Dewan whose tea plantation was assessed as ordinary rice lands as a result of which he had to pay a high rate of land revenue as against the European tea planters who had amassed huge amount of rent free waste lands and paid concessional rate on the remaining part of the assessed land.\textsuperscript{132} The number of tea gardens owned by the Assamese were few and the total area of the 14 tea gardens owned by the Assamese planters in the district of Sibsagar in 1905 – 06, measured around 8, 160 acres whereas the Assam Tea Company had 40, 202 acres under its occupation; Jorhat Tea Company 14, 654 acres and Singlo Tea Company had 13, 828 acres under their occupation.\textsuperscript{133} Bengali bourgeoisie from Calcutta entered the tea industry of Assam as shareholders and enjoyed the profits from the plantations they had never seen.\textsuperscript{134} It is on record that out of the 11 members of the first set of the Board of Directors of the Assam Tea Company, Dwarkanath Tagore, Prassana Kumar Tagore, and Motilal Sheel were from Bengal.\textsuperscript{135}

\textit{The role of the colonial Government}

The British administration also played its role in undermining the vital interests of the indigenous people of Assam through its self centered and short sighted policies and thereby fomenting a never ending schism between the indigenous Assamese and the Bengalis and other immigrant communities. The colonial administrators treated Assam as

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ibid}, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Ibid}, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Ibid}. 

an extension of Bengal, ‘a colonial hinterland’ and regarded Assamese as an off-shoot of the Bengali language and were responsible for its dislodgement in 1836 – 37 from the schools and courts of Assam. Though Assamese was restored as the official language and the medium of instructions in the schools and Assam made a separate province in 1874, Sylhet was joined with it to the detriment of the Assamese interest, as the Sylhet region consisted of a sizeable chunk of the Bengali speaking population who were more advanced than the Assamese in terms of education and were in a better position to compete in terms of government jobs. In fact this administrative arrangement could have been devised “to divide and rule the province with a white Chief Commissioner/ Governor maintaining the balance of loaves and fishes between the two rival valleys jealous of each others.”

Demands from the Assam valley and sometime even from the Surma valley to separate Sylhet from Assam was not given any serious attention by the British government and instead of heeding to those legitimate demands, what they did in matters of recruitment to various government services, was to follow the policy of communal representation in which the Hindus of the two valley’s were separately represented and the Muslim of both the Assam Valley and the Surma Valley were clubbed as one. To sum up colonial political geography was a part of what has been called Orientalism - the way of conceptualizing the landscape of the colonial world that evolved as a tool of colonial domination.

Again for political and administrative reasons in 1905, Bengal was partitioned and a new province of East Bengal and Assam was created in which the Assamese were reduced to a minority linguistic group. A British official P. G. Melitus remarked in the Legislative

\[\text{\textsuperscript{137}}\] Proceedings of The Assam Legislative Council, 1936, The Assam Gazette, Part VI, 1936, Published by Authority, Shillong, p. 15.  
Council of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1908, that the Assam valley would be a great revenue asset for the transferred districts of Eastern Bengal as it would provide a home for the surplus population of Eastern Bengal, when the population which in many of them was increasing rapidly, outgrows the means of subsistence.\(^{139}\)

Apart from the frequent territorial readjustment of Assam, which affected its cultural and political homogeneity, the restructuring of the revenue system, monopoly of the opium trade, by the colonial authorities impoverished the Assamese at the hands of the Marwari and their active encouragement to immigration from East Bengal almost threatened the distinct political identity of the Assamese race. A.H.W. Bentinck, one of the nominated European member in the Assam Legislative Council maintained (during the course of a discussion on restriction on further immigration in 1925 in the legislative Council) that no one in Assam can lay his claim to be the aborigine of Assam as Ahom, Kacharis, Assamese, Bengalis, Sylethis, Mymensinghias and even Europeans came from outside the province.\(^{140}\)

In 1936, during the course of the debate for the abolition of the Line System, an European member L.A. Roffey, representing the planters, expressed his fullest sympathy for the indigenous Assamese who may be swamped eventually by the East Bengali migrants but ‘the weaker is bound to go to the wall in favour of the stronger and they must work out their own salvation, the welfare and advancement of the province of Assam as a whole must be the ever present thought of all those who have its best interest at heart.’\(^{141}\)

\(^{139}\) Proceedings of the Legislative Council of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1908, Shillong, 1908, p. 79.

\(^{140}\) Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1925, The Assam Gazette, Part VI, 1925, Published by Authority, Shillong, p. 1430.

These members representing the planters and other nominated European members along with the Muslim members from Sylhet and other parts of the provinces blocked every possible initiative made by some of the Assamese member to regulate and halt the unabated flow of migration into Assam in the Assam Legislative Council and Assembly. However at times the colonial officials tried to portray themselves as genuine friends and savior of the Assamese against the onslaughts of the immigrants. Occasionally they only expressed their concern at the plight of the Assamese rather than taking any meaningful action to protect them from the most advanced and aggressive section of the immigrants and their leaders. Their concerns sans actions only added to the fear psychosis of the Assamese. For instance, during the colonial rule the census reports in Assam has been far from a passive register of social facts; it has also been a tool in the political management of tensions over immigration.\(^{142}\) Here the Census Report of Assam 1931, along with the view of C. S. Mullan, the Census Superintendent deserves special mention.

The publication of the 1931 Census Report of Assam aggravated the fear complex among the Assamese and it described the influx of immigrants in military terms. C.S. Mullan, described the immigration of the East Bengali Muslims as the most important event in the province during the period from 1911 – 1931, an event which was likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invasion of 1820 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization.\(^{143}\)

---


Amalendu Guha described C.S. Mullan as “an irresponsible British Civil Servant who tried to instigate a hate campaign against the immigrant community.”\textsuperscript{144} According to Guha “Mullan tried to peer into the future and mischievously forecast the future course of the ‘invasion’. …The motivation behind such irresponsible and unfounded utterings was clear. He wanted the immigrants and the Assamese to be set against each other.”\textsuperscript{145} Critics of the Assam Movement however argue that, if anything, Mullan fears have been proven to be misplaced.\textsuperscript{146} Monirul Hussain observes, that only the black tribals from Jharkhand region and the oppressed peasants from East Bengal and other autochthon tribals mainly because of their class position have assimilated deeply with the emerging ‘Asamiya’ nationality.\textsuperscript{147}

Guha points out that the ultimately the false prophecy of C.S. Mullan provided a rationale to Assamese ‘chauvinism’ which was to plague Assam for many years to come and here he was passing his observations on the ‘Sangrakshini Sabha’ of Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury and Gyananath Bora and the mouthpiece ‘Dainik Batori’ which repeatedly argued that unless Sylhet is separated and influx of settlers from East Bengal stopped, it would be difficult for the Assamese to survive as a nationality.\textsuperscript{148} According to Guha, imperialism encouraged regionalism and looked upon its high priest as the allies of British imperialism.\textsuperscript{149} Here he cities three names, Rai Bahadur S.K. Bhuyan (who made path-breaking research to discover the historical and cultural symbols of Assamese sub-

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{144} Guha, Amalendu. \textit{Planter Raj to Swaraj}, p. 171. \\
\textsuperscript{145} ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{146} Baruah, Sanjib. \textit{Op.cit}, p. 57. \\
\textsuperscript{147} Hussain, Monirul. \textit{Assam Movement, Class Ideology and Identity}, Manak Publications, New Delhi, 1993, p. 269. \\
\textsuperscript{148} Guha, Amalendu. \textit{Planter Raj to Swaraj}, p. 171. \\
\end{flushright}
nationalism) who was nominated to Gauhati Municipal Board and later in the National War Front, Sivaprasad Baruah the richest Indian tea planter and Nilomoni Phukan, both started the ‘Dainik Batori’ where Jnananath Bora contributed several articles advocating the secession of Assam from India.\textsuperscript{150}

There was also the fact that the colonial authorities had enough overriding power at their disposal (in relation to the legislations and administrative measures) to address the Assamese anxiety over the immigration issue from East Bengal, and thereby putting effective checks and curbs on further immigration than relying on the dysfunctional Line System. But on this vital issue too, the colonial authorities meticulously observed the new principle of provincial autonomy (although they frequently violated the principle during the course of the 2nd world war) and left the matter to be dealt ‘in the inconclusive and acrimonious debates in the legislative Assembly.\textsuperscript{151} The British authorities did not take actions to address these fear and insecurity of the Assamese rather they stoked it and gave a free field to the Muslim League in Assam to devise their pro immigrant policies.

An instance of the colonial officials favouring the Bengali immigrants in the Assam valley was highlighted during the course of the Budget session in 1936, by Rohini Kumar Chaudhury when he pointed out that while a number of indigenous Assamese schools like the ‘Kanara High School’, ‘Samata High School’ and ‘Gobinda Chandra High School’, did not get or were not granted the aid they deserved, they government came forward to help the Bengali community (who said that their children could never understand an Assamese

\textsuperscript{150} ibid.
\textsuperscript{151} Gohain, Hiren. Assam - A Burning Question, p. 49.
teacher when he teaches in Assamese) to establish their own school in Guwahati.\textsuperscript{152} He said that with the establishment of this Bengali medium school, the government had sown the seed of a poisonous tree which would forever disunite the Assamese and the Bengali. He failed to understand why high officials of the government like the Director of Public Instruction, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division, the District Officer, and more particularly the Superintendent of Police, who had nothing to do with matters relating to education, had all came and grouped themselves round the foundation stone of the school.\textsuperscript{153}

\textit{Apathy of Mainstream Congress leaders to the Peculiar situation of Assam}

Further, the apathy shown by a major section of the mainstream Indian leadership from the Indian National Congress towards Assam and its vital concerns only added to the growing perception among the Assamese that the Indian political class was not bothered about Assam and its core interests and were even ready to sacrifice them for their own political ends. The first of such instance was noticed when on November 1937, Nilomoni Phukan and Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury on behalf of the ‘Assam Sangrakhini Sabha’ submitted a petition to Jawaharlal Nehru on the vexed issue of the Line System and pointed out that a purely racial and a local question had been given communal colour by the Muslim League.\textsuperscript{154}

“The Bengali Hindu and Muslim who run at one another’s throat in their own province, are all in one in Assam in this respect, not with a view to fighting for

\textsuperscript{152} Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1936, \textit{The Assam Gazette}, Part VI, 1936, Published by Authority, Shillong, 1936, p. 263.
\textsuperscript{153} ibid.
\textsuperscript{154} Guha, Amalendu. \textit{Planter raj to Swaraj}, p. 208.
the cause of Indian freedom, but for establishing their Bengali kingdom in close cooperation with the British Government. There has been a serious set back to the process of assimilation with the Assamese. The Mymensinghi immigrants who had voluntary come forward to identify their interest with those of the Assamese are now persuaded to give that up and are being forced to read Bengali.”

Nehru in reply pointed out that the issue pertaining to the Line System should be looked at from an economic point of view and he remarked

“I have noticed that enough soil in Assam are still lying waste and from economic point of view no land in any country would be allowed to remain like this. Since wealth does not come from outside but shall have to be produced in the country no land could be allowed to lie in waste.”

He concluded “A war in the world is imminent. Will you then remain passive with the question of ‘Sylhet’ or ‘Line System’?”. Surely for Nehru, the issues affecting Assam’s identity and culture, and vital economic interests, hardly mattered to him as he was more focused on issues of national and international ramification.

To cite another instance, the position taken by Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Vallabhbhai Patel, during the Cabinet Mission Plan and the Grouping Scheme in 1946, as a result of which Assam was placed under Group ‘C’ along with

---

157 ibid.
Bengal sent shock waves even among the die hard Congress followers of Assam and some of them even advocated more aggressive means to safeguard Assam’s political and cultural identity. Implications of the Cabinet Mission Plan for Assam were that Assam would have 10 seats in the Constituency Assembly - 7 Hindu (Generals), 3 (Muslims). Bengal on the other hand would send a total number of 60 representatives in the Constituent Assembly (33 Muslims, 27 Hindus).\(^{158}\)

The working committee of the Assam Provincial Congress having carefully read the recommendation of the Cabinet Mission Plan published on 16. 5. 1946, authorized the Hon’ble Gopinath Bardoloi to lodge its protests against the Grouping of Assam with Bengal and to place its case before the working committee of the All India Congress.\(^{159}\) On 16\(^{th}\) July, 1946, the Assam Government passed a resolution on the Cabinet Mission Plan in the Assam Legislative Assembly and the Resolution read as follows.\(^{160}\)

“This assembly directs the ten representatives elected by it as laid down in the said statement of 16\(^{th}\) May 1946, to act in the manner as set forth below-

1) That the said representative shall settle and frame the constitution of the province of Assam in a meeting or meetings in which only they take part.

2) That the Province of Assam has an undoubted claim to have the constitution of the province framed and settled by its own representative selected to the constituent assembly and that it will be detrimental to the interest of the province of Assam to form any section or sections or group or groups with any


\(^{159}\) *Political History of Assam*, Subject - Assam Pradesh Congress position on the Grouping of Assam with Bengal, State Archives, Assam, p. 29.

other province of British India for the purpose of settling the constitution for
the province of Assam.

3) That the said representatives shall not take part in any meeting or meetings of
any section or group of provinces for the purpose of framing and settling the
constitution for the province of Assam.

4) That the said representatives shall take part in all meeting or meetings of the
constituent Assembly to settle the union constitution in all matters relating to
the Union Constitution.”

Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad
initially supported Bardoloi’s stand but later all three of them began to waver and
even held Assam responsible for failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan. Maulana
Abul Kalam Azad although found the Cabinet Mission Plan excellent with all its
‘grouping’ and ‘sections’ devices, yet he publicly gave support to the Congress
delegates from Assam who were opposed to these very devices. Nehru on the other
hand suggested that the Assam legislative Assembly should pass a resolution refusing
to go to the Sections.

However they all started to back off from their earlier stand. Maulana Azad stated
that the Congress was in favour of the Cabinet Mission Plan but objection were raised by
certain Congress leaders from Assam who objected to the formation of the ‘Group ‘C’ as
they were possessed by an inexplicable fear of Bengal. Nehru even remarked that Assam

---

162 Ibid.
163 Ibid, p. 221.
164 Ibid, p. 239.
cannot hold up the progress of the rest of India and support to Assam would mean letting loose the forces of chaos.\textsuperscript{165}

Sardar Patel, on 4\textsuperscript{th} January, 1947, reportedly told a Bengal delegate that the whole of India could not be plunged into a civil war for the sake of Assam.\textsuperscript{166} In retaliation on 26\textsuperscript{th} December, 1946, the working committee of the Assam Congress passed a resolution to meet Gandhi and explain Assam’s position on the Cabinet Mission Plan and the resolution passed by the Assam Legislative Assembly against the Grouping of Assam with Bengal.\textsuperscript{167}

In early 1947, Bardoloi entrusted Bijoy Bhagawati, the then Secretary of the Assam Congress, Mohendra Mohan Chaudhury, the then Secretary of the Assam Congress Parliamentary Party, to brief Gandhi and apprise him about the delicate situation of Assam.\textsuperscript{168} Both the leaders briefed Gandhi about the developments in Assam and the ‘Grouping Scheme’ as well as the position taken by the Central and State Congress leaders.\textsuperscript{169}

Gandhi declared that Assam indeed made a big mistake by following his earlier decision in 1939, on resignation of Congress ministries across India to protest India’s involvement in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} World War. It should have stood its ground and abided by Subhas Bose advice that ‘Assam was a special case’.\textsuperscript{170}

\textsuperscript{165}\textit{Ibid}, p. 232.
\textsuperscript{166}\textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{167} Political History of Assam, Subject - Assam Pradesh Congress position on the Grouping of Assam with Bengal, Directorate of State Archives, Assam, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Ibid}, p. 230.
Gandhi then advised Assam against going into the Constituent Assembly under the Grouping and Section scheme and advised that it should lodge its protest and retire from the Constituent Assembly.\textsuperscript{171} He said,

“if you do not act correctly and now, Assam will be finished.......it is an impertinent suggestion that Bengal should dominate Assam in any way.”\textsuperscript{172}

There were also protests within Assam from right wing nationalist organizations led by Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury as well among non Congress tribal leaders of the Hills who remarked the centre was completely ignorant of the Muslim League Plan’s to capture the lands and hills of Assam by sending hordes of immigrants from East Bengal. But they warned that the people of the hills will fight it till the last.\textsuperscript{173}

The spirited opposition of the Congress in Assam led by Bardoloi and Gandhi’s stand on the whole issue which was supportive of Assam’s cause led ultimately the Central leadership of the Congress to change its stand. The Muslim League in the meantime rejected the Cabinet Mission Plan as nothing short of Pakistan would satisfy their demand.

In April, 1947 exactly four months after Gandhi helped the Assam Congress to hoist the banner of revolt, Lord Mountbatten had a meeting with Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The Viceroy said that Jinnah in no way could expect Assam in Pakistan. Lord Mountbatten said

\textsuperscript{171} ibid.
\textsuperscript{172} ibid
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid, p. 233.
'In the East I pointed out that he (Jinnah) would get the most useless part of Bengal without Calcutta and if he wished it he could have Sylhet back from Assam.'\textsuperscript{174}

At the end of this discussion on the factors which contributed towards the growth and sustenance of the feeling of sub nationalism in Assam, it must be added that the Assamese sub nationalist movement had an anti Bengali tinge to it since the Bengali competed with the Assamese in both their cultural and economic spaces. The Marwari traders dominated the trade and commerce of Assam and carried on with their ruthless exploitation of the Assamese peasantry but they never interfered in the cultural matters of Assam rather some of them contributed towards its enrichment. This was also not the case with the Nepalis and the tea garden labour community as they did not compete with the indigenous Assamese in both the economic and the cultural fronts. The conflict that existed between the indigenous Assamese and the immigrant Bengalis in Assam was also because of the resistance of the latter towards the process of assimilation (even Bengali Muslim leaders like Abdul Matin Chaudhury, Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasami, resisted the forceful acceptance of the Assamese language) and this was due to the Bengali immigrants numerical and cultural viability and therefore they competed for a dominant role in the Assamese society.\textsuperscript{175} The tea garden labourer and the Nepali migrants on the other hand without any inhibitions assimilated with the Assamese culture and this has ultimately resulted in them being regarded a part of the Assamese nation.


\textsuperscript{175} Baruah, Apurba Kumar. \textit{Social Tensions in Assam, Middle Class Politics}, Purbanchal Prakash, Guwahati, 1991, pp, 37, 38.
Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury (Was he a Chauvinist?)

According to Amalendu Guha the evolution of nationalism in Assam during the colonial period was intertwined simultaneously along two contradictory trends - Pan Indian and Regional. Pan Indian nationalism was grounded in a feeling of all India unity while little nationalism or regional nationalism was based on regional-linguistic unity.  

To Sanjib Baruah there was always a simmering tension between Assamese sub-nationalism and pan Indian nationalism during the entire phase of the anti-colonial struggle or even preceding it. This contradiction was manifested through the actions of several nationalists leaders of Assam like Gopinath Bordoloi, N.C. Bordoloi, Lakhminath Bezbarua but the tensions between the two trends can be seen best through the career of one of the prominent and controversial political figure of Assam of that period, Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury.

Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury (1885-1967) was involved in a wide range of activities from literary to cultural to politics. He was a militant anti colonial activist and had plunged himself into India’s struggle for freedom. One of the key members of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee, in 1926, he composed the inaugural song of the first annual session of the Congress to be held in Assam. At the same time he founded an important socio-political organization which represented the Assamese aspirations: The Assam Samrakhsini Sabha’ (Assamese Preservation Society) to and protect and promote Assam’s vital interests which later morphed into ‘The Assam Jatiya Mahasabha’ (The Assam National

---

177 Baruah, Sanjib. India Against Itself, Assam and the Politics of Nationality, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, p. 74.
178 Ibid.
He also brought out two magazines ‘Deka Asom’ (Young Assam) and ‘Cetana’ (Consciousness) where he wrote several articles expressing his concerns about the threats that Assamese society and culture faced from the onslaughts of the Bengali immigrant groups both Hindu and Muslims. Ambikagiri’s idea on nationalism, national interest, and the relation of the Assamese nationalism with Indian nationalism and his views on immigration appealing them to assimilate with the Assamese culture can be gathered from his collection of 40 articles contained in a booklet named ‘Ahuti’.

Ambikagiri was concerned about the threats that uninterrupted immigration from East Bengal and the increasing influence of the Bengali language in Assam, posed to the Assamese identity and he believed that a small nationality like the Assamese could save itself from extinction only if it consciously developed nationalist idea and it was to instill such feelings among the Assamese that Ray Choudhury formed ‘the Assam Samrakhsini Sabha’ with the objectives ‘to form or build the Assamese nation by bringing together the high and low, rich and poor, and people across religion and caste divide’. ‘The Assam Samrakhsini Sabha’ was therefore committed to any policy that will support Assamese interest but will oppose anything that is inimical to the advancement of interests of the Assamese nation. The Sabha was to ensure the full control of the Assamese over Assam’s land and natural resources, agriculture, commerce, industry, trade, employment, language, literature, culture, and ethos. However the aggressive posture of Ambikagiri on the issue of Assamese national identity led a dominant section of the Bengal intelligentsia

179 ibid.
180 ibid.
182 ibid.
of Calcutta to call him ‘Bongal Kheda Neta’. Even historian Amalendu Guha in his book ‘Planter Roy to Swaraj’ while critically examining Ambikagiri’s political activities particularly as regards to his view on the immigration issues repeatedly calls Ambikagiri a chauvinist. According to Guha

“The divisive league politics of curving out of India a new state of Pakistan that was to include Assam provided an opportunity to the chauvinistic influence of Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury to thrive, particularly when the congress leaders were in jail from 1942. No doubt his patriotism was genuine; but there was an aspect of his life and work that gave rise to controversies and encouraged anti Bengali chauvinism. In his concept of future Indian federation of linguistic nationalism, he laid emphasis on the principle of dual citizenship and opposed multiculturalism at the provincial level.”

Guha argued that Ray Chaudhury particularly targeted the Bengali residing in Assam at every available public platform and blamed the Bengali community of Assam for so long endangering the Assamese language and culture and being more hostile to the Assamese interests than the British. Guha notes that Ray Chaudhury call for two lakh Assamese volunteer corps styled as the ‘Assam Atmarakshini Vahini’ to resist further immigration was unheeded by the Assamese, a proof that they were not fascinated by his ideas and thoughts. To Guha, Ray Chaudhury’s ‘Assam Samrakshini Sabha’ was more like a platform for the articulation of the widely shared son of the soil sentiment and also acted as

---

185 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
188 Ibid, pp. 258, 259.
a pressure group within the Assam Congress.\textsuperscript{189} The Congress organization in Assam found in him a leader who was useful as a mouthpiece of Assamese reaction to the divisive Muslim League politics in Assam.\textsuperscript{190}

This was a wrong interpretation of Ambikagiri’s idea since he was not a secessionist and he never preached hatred against any particular community but was in fact defending the Assamese interests, appealing to the immigrant communities to assimilate with the Assamese language and culture. As a matter of fact these views were shared by all the noted public intellectuals and political activists of Assam of that period. Even the Report of Line System Committee of 1938 observed that the immigrant East Bengalis should accept the Assamese language.\textsuperscript{191}

The ‘Assam Samrakshini Sabha’ led by Ray Chaudhury made a beginning by taking up issues which affected the Assamese national interests. Two such major challenges were – Separation of Sylhet from Assam and to control the unabated immigration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal. These issues were regarded, as a matter of fact, by many Assamese elites and nationalists of that period as a major threat to Assamese identity and these concerns dominated the public discourse in Assam during the pre-independent period and Ray Chaudhury should not be singled out and called a ‘Chauvinist’ for highlighting these issues through his organization. A Congress party election leaflet in 1946, even declared that unless the province of Assam is organized on Assamese language and Assamese culture, the survival of Assamese nationality will become impossible. The inclusion of Bengali speaking Sylhet district, plain portion of the Cachar district and the

\textsuperscript{189} ibid, p. 259.
\textsuperscript{190} ibid.
settling of hundreds and thousands of Bengali settlers, threatened to destroy the distinctiveness of Assam. It called upon voters to install the Congress party as a majority party in the Assembly in order to solve and redress these problems.\textsuperscript{192}

Ambikagiri appealed to the immigrants to assimilate with the Assamese culture and way of life since they came to Assam as their own land could not give them the opportunity even for subsistence.\textsuperscript{193} He even contended that all other linguistic communities are entitled to ask for similar assimilation in their own homeland. There is no harm if an Assamese residing in Bengal assimilates with the Bengali culture if the Bengalis living in Assam shows a similar gesture of meshing himself with the Assamese way of life.\textsuperscript{194}

There may have been an aggressive tone in his politics but he was an undoubtedly a true Assamese nationalist and it is highly debatable whether such politics could be summarily dismissed as chauvinistic and secessionist as he never dreamt of Assam as an independent country. He was only defending Assam core interests and before calling him a ‘chauvinist’ the provocative speeches of Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasami, Abdul Matin Chowdhury, and Abdul Rouf of the Assam Provincial Muslim League who wanted Assam to be included in East Pakistan and also the apathy of mainstream Indian leaders from the Congress towards Assam’s vital concerns should be considered.

In fact Ray Chaudhury’s idea of forming the \textit{Assam Atmarakshini Vahini}, should also be examined in its proper context. In 1946, when the Congress government led by Gopinath Bordoloi started the rightful measure of evicting immigrant East Bengalis from forest and grazing reserves, Bhasami along with other immigrant leaders were inciting the encroachers

\textsuperscript{194} \textit{Ibid}, p. 62.
to resist government action by whatever means it was possible. It was under such circumstances that the Assam Atmarakshini Vahini was formed and Ray Chaudhury declared

“The Assamese have nowhere to go except Assam. The victims of the Noakhali disturbance in Bengal are entering Assam. But if the Assamese fall prey to the miscreants, where will they go? We have nowhere to go except the hills. But even there won’t we lose our identity? What is the way out for Assamese?.... Assam’s land is the age old inheritance of the Assamese people. The Assamese must rise as a man to defend this national property. Otherwise there is no reprieve for the Assamese. There is no other place where the Assamese jati can survive.”  

All these suggest that he was only trying to preserve the territorial integrity of Assam and its political and cultural distinctiveness.

But if one analyzes the views of Ambikagiri closely especially on the issue of the Assamese nationality, one find that in Ray Chaudhury’s vision of an Assamese identity and an Assamese homeland, there was little space for the hill people and no thought was given to the questions relating to their power sharing or representation. His was an idealized picture of a greater Assam where the largest linguistic group the Assamese would live in peace and harmony with the neighbor. He expressed his unhappiness at the adoption of foreign manners and habits by the hill people and their distancing themselves from the

---

196 ibid, p. 31.
Assamese language and traditions. He never saw any possibility of a conflict between the collective needs of the Assamese people and those of the different smaller linguistic groups living within the geographical boundary of Assam.

It was this aspect of his political thinking that may be regarded as having some signs of chauvinism but not his views on immigration as in the latter case his only priority was to safeguard Assam and its people vital political, cultural, and economic interests.

**Jnananath Bora’s view on Assamese National identity.**

Jnananath Bora was one of Assam’s noted public intellectual during the pre-independent period and was actively associated with Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury and his ‘Assam Samrakshini Sabha’ and a regular contributor to Ray Chaudhury’s magazine ‘Chetna’ and Sivaprasad Baruah’s ‘Dainik Batori’ where he wrote an influential set of essays ‘Assamat Bidashi’ (Foreigners in Assam) in 1935 discussing the issue of immigration very elaborately. He was of the view that in the context of Assam’s peculiar circumstances, an area with exceptionally high immigration and where the levers of economy is controlled by the ‘foreigners’, the issue of immigration is quite urgent. Borah was concerned about the economic domination of the immigrants and their total control of the trade and commerce of Assam.

He observed that ‘foreigners’ (immigrants) would have been less of a threat to Assam, if the trade and commerce of Assam were in the hands of the Assamese and this in a way could have averted Assam’s demographic shift, as according to his estimates, if at

---

197 *ibid.*
198 *ibid.*
the beginning of the British rule, 8,00,000 Assamese had been in control of their trade and commerce. Assamese population could have increased fivefold to 4 million. The fivefold increase in population within a century was not implausible but unfortunately this was not the destiny of Assam. So while focusing on the question of immigration, he was more involved with the economic aspect of the issue rather than cultural which stressed more on the language factor.

In another set of articles – ‘Kamrup aru Bharatvarsha’ and ‘Assam Desh Bharator Bhitarat Thakiba Kiya’ (why should Assam stay in India?) he observed that Assam’s regeneration was possible only if it is separated from India and become independent as according to him there was no historical similarity between Assam and India, since both took different historical courses and like Burma, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Assam was a neighboring country of India, a distinct country, with a distinct administration. The question of Assamese national identity was a historical question, he noted, and this question cannot be resolved if Assam remain within the Indian ‘nation-state.’

He resented the growing influence of the Congress in Assam and blamed it for weakening the Assamese ‘Jati’ by creating a schism between the Assamese Hindus and Assamese Muslims. He noted as follows

“These days people often say that unless Indian unites, they will not be able to gain Independence. But how should different provinces, different languages, different religion, different literature, become one? Should we completely

---

200 ibid.
201 Misra, Udayon. The Periphery Strikes Back, Challenges to the Nation State in Assam and Nagaland, Shimla, 2000, p. 89.
202 ibid, pp. 89, 90.
203 ibid, p. 90.
eliminate our differences and try to create one language, one literature, one nation? Is that what we need in order to achieve independence?” 204

Like Ray Chaudhury, Jnananath Bora pointed out that the different tribal communities of Assam should come within the fold of ‘Assam Jatiyatabad’ although he was of the view that people from Coach Bihar and Jalpaiguri should also form a part of independent Assam as the plight of the ‘Rajbongshi’ ‘the Mechs’ ‘the Bodo’ ethnic groups was the result of their staying within India.” 205

**Kamalakanta Bhattacharya**

Kamalakanta Bhattacharya editor of the journal ‘Assam Hitaishi’, through his verses and poems found in the booklet ‘Chintanol’ tried to raise the consciousness of the Assamese peasantry against the ‘usurious’ exploitation of the Marwari Mahajans of Assam. 206 Lamenting the impoverishment of Assam and the loss of trade and commerce to the ‘foreigners’, Bhattacharya noted that Assam could prosper, if the Assamese cease to trust the ‘foreigners’ and start working with their own people: ‘The ‘foreigners’ he thought, have become rich and they are hostile towards the Assamese interests and impede any new business started by the Assamese.” 207 In his different poems ‘Udagoni’, (Inspiration) ‘Purnima Ratiloi Sai’, (Looking at full moon night) ‘Ei na Assam nahai ne Smashan’, (Is this Assam or a graveyard) ‘Jatiya Gaurav’, (National Pride) ‘Marisali Endhar Nikha’, (The Dark Midnight) ‘Bhiksha’, (Begging), the theme and the implicit idea

---

206 Nag, Sajal. Social Reactions to ‘Bania’ exploitation, A Study of the ideological revolt of the Assamese against Merchants and usurers as found in a 19th Century Poetry Collection, North East India History Association, Volume VI, 1985, pp. 311 – 315.
207 ibid.
were same - the merciless, cruel exploitation by the Marwari money lenders of the poor Assamese peasantry pushing the latter on the brink of penury and an appeal to the youth of Assam to raise their voice against this loot and plunder engaged by these foreigners on the common Assamese peasantry. If the Assamese did not fight the ‘foreigners’ all they can expect, he predicted, was a bleak feature as all government jobs and commercial pursuits are in the grip of the ‘foreigners’. 208

**Related Sub Nationalist Activities**

Apart from Ambikagiri Ray Chaudhury and Jnananath Bora, there were individuals like Nilomoni Phukan, Tarun Ram Phukan, Benudhar Rajkhowa, Siva Prasad Baruah and a host of other political activists as well as cultural organizations like *The Assam Sahitya Sabha*, *The Assam Chatra Samilan*, which represented the Assamese sub-nationalist trends.

In 1927, while presiding over the *Assam Sahitya Sabha*, Tarun Ram Phukan commented,

“We Asamiyas are a distinct nationality (*Jati*) amongst Indians. Though her language is Sanskrit based, it is a distinct language. A rising nationality shows signs of life by way of extending domination over others. Alas! It is otherwise (with us); we are incapable of self-defense today! We are not only dependent, but even a dependent neighbor is trying to swallow us, taking advantage of our

208 *ibid.*
helplessness. Brother Asamiya! Recollect your past glory to have an understanding of the present situation.”

Here Tarun Ram Phukan was referring to Bengal as an existential threat to the independent identity of the Assamese nationality and its various symbols.

In his presidential address in the Dhubri session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1926, Benudhar Rajkhowa in fact remarked –

“Let all nationalities (Jati) of India follow their own paths. The Brahmaputra, the Ganga, the Yamuna, the Kaveri, the Sindhu – let all of them go on and flow along their respective courses. Let there be no attempt to merge one with the other. Finally, all will converge in the Indian Ocean that is the Indian nation (Mahajati). Troubles will increase if any other method is resorted to for creating the Indian nation.”

Rajkhowa expressed satisfaction that a large chunk of the Bengali Muslim population from Mymensingh were ready to assimilate with the Assamese language and culture and predicted that they would all be proud to call themselves as ‘Asamiya’ in due course. Chandranath Sarma who played a major role in the merger of the Assam Association with the Indian National Congress in 1920 also remarked that Assamese national identity might disappear under the onrush of the foreigner (immigrants).

---


210 ibid, p. 75

211 ibid, pp. 75, 76.

Attempts were made to re-call the past glory of Assam. Lachi Bar Phukan, the great Assamese warrior of the 17th Century who resisted the Mughal invaders in the Battle of Saraighat, in 1671, was invoked as a symbol of resistance to immigrant outsiders. Guha mention the name of S.K. Bhuyan who through his painstaking, path-breaking research tried to invoke the historical and cultural symbols of Asamiya little nationalism. Since the issue of immigration was inextricably linked with the Assamese nationality question, some of these intellectuals always regarded every non-Assamese in Assam as a foreigner. An important remark was made by Birinchi Kumar Barua, Dean of Arts Faculty, Gauhati University, who stated that ‘culturally, linguistically, racially, every non-Assamese is a foreigner in Assam. Every foreigner who came to and resided since the British occupation must be viewed as an alien if Assam was to save herself from the grip of foreigners.’ A section of the Congress leadership in Assam also ‘harbored strong autonomous sentiments’ which is revealed during the debates on the Centre – State relationship in the Constituent Assembly. Their main plank was that Assam should be given the independence to utilize its resources for its own interests. However these leaders led by Gopinath Bardoloi succeeded in neutralizing the influence of the secessionist in the political discourse of Assam during that period. These leaders seldom sacrificed Assam’s core interest evident from Bardoloi’s role during the Cabinet Mission’s Plan for Assam as well

214 Ibid, p. 80.  
as during the debates in the Constituent Assembly where he stood for the economic autonomy of Assam.