The Assamese middle class started playing a significant role in the socio-political sphere of Assamese society only in the later part of Colonial era. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Assamese people participated in political activities through the formation of various political organizations and associations. Initially, the high caste educated Hindus alone participated in the political process.

The coming of the British was greeted with joy by many Assamese people. Before the advent of the British there was chaos and disorder all over Assam. Misrule by some inefficient rulers brought untold misery to the people. "The raj appeared on the scene in the guise of saviour of the people suffering from a situation of chaos, lawlessness and oppression that had persisted since the 1770's starting with the Mymensing Civil War and culminating in the Burmese occupation of the Assam plain (1817-1824)." People of Assam expressed their gratification at the coming of the British at this critical juncture.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan remarked "Our countryman hailed the day on which British supremacy was proclaimed in the province of Assam and entertained sanguine expectations of peace and happiness from the rule of Britain. For several years antecedent to the annexation, the province groaned under the oppression and lawless tyranny of the Burmese, whose barbarous and inhuman policy depopulated the country and destroyed more than one half of the population." Assamese society experienced political instability and chaos during the rule by the Burmese from the year 1819 to 1826. The Britishers restored normalcy to some extent.

With the advent of the British along with spread of education, mass media and urbanization, Assamese people became politically more articulate. The system of imparting education which was prevalent in pre-British Assamese society failed to make people articulate, instead of making them politically conscious, they were made religious minded. The indigenous system of education continued to exist in Assam even after the period of Civil Wars and invasions.

in a number of Satras, Tols and Pathasalas where instructions imparted were mostly of religious nature leading to a pious life and not so much for any useful purpose or widening the mental horizon. Indigenous educational institutions like Pathasalas, Tols, Madrassas were on the decline and new pattern of education was introduced by the British.

After seeing non-Assamese in almost all government offices, Major Jenkins, Commissioner and Agent to the Governor General for Assam and North East of Rangpur, felt the need for training Assamese people so that they could also man positions in government offices. Jenkins therefore "strongly urged the government of India in his letter of 21 June 1834 for the establishment of English schools under supervision of European functionaries at the sadar stations - Goalpara, Gauhati, Nowgong, Darrang and Bishwanath, for necessary training, a number of Assamese youths of rank should be sent to Calcutta and provisionally teachers capable of teaching English and Bengali would have to be procured from Bengal."  

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4. Ibid., p.104.
The Britishers found a backward peasant economy in Assam. The whole of Brahmaputra Valley remained extremely backward and economy of Assam registered very little development under British imperialism. Excepting tea plantations, development in all spheres was slow.

Revolts by the peasants during the early British Rule in Assam were the earliest popular mass based movements. Under the leadership of educated middle class, the poor peasants reacted against the land revenue measures of the British by organizing peoples' assemblies. Middle class at the end of the nineteenth century included some western educated lawyers and intellectuals. Leading middle-class men like Dinanath Bezbarua, Ghanashyam Barua, Manik Chandra Barua and others had strong rural links. Generally, they belonged to Mazadar families and had private landed property. Land revenue measures adopted by the British affected their landed interests also. Therefore, they collaborated with the peasants to fight against British. "...middle-class could make common cause with the peasantry in the assessment question because their landed interests were
also suffering under it. They joined hands with the peasantry in the initial stage and tried to keep the uprising moderate through petitions and memorials."5

Between 1868 to 1871, land revenue rates were doubled. The increase in the land revenue led to peasant uprisings in many parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. The ryots tried to resist this enhancement in land revenue. The increase in land revenue in 1861 by the British on the dry crop lands provoked the peasants. "A raij mel (Peoples' assembly) was there upon held at Phulaguri in October. The assembly was scheduled to be in session for five days to ensure participation of men even from distant villages. Approximately, one thousand people assembled by 15 October, five to six hundred people in that assembly were armed with lathis."6 The rural elites consisting of Brahmins and Mahantas took part in the peasant uprisings. The peasants protested against government's fiscal policy through the organization of M. S. Barua, "The Assamese Middle Class: Its Role in the Peasant Uprisings of 1893-94" in B. D. Roy, ed., Emergence A Role of Middle Class in NE India (New Delhi, 1993), p. 63.

The peasants again protested when the Britishers imposed ban on poppy cultivation in 1860. Peasant economy of Nowgong was worst affected by this ban because it was one of the opium producing districts of Assam. Again, the revenue policy adopted by the government led to dissatisfaction among the agricultural ryots. The peasants, under the leadership of educated Assamese middle class, protested against land revenue and taxation policy of the British. Disregarding the peasants' protest the Britishers continued to exploit the peasantry by increasing taxes. "As soon as the news of enhancement became official, objections from all the five Brahmaputra districts valley/began to pour in. The maximum number of objections about 14,000 came from Kamrup, followed by Jorhat with 436, Nowgong with 311 and the Mangaldai sub-division of Darrang with 293". The agitation by the peasants succeeded as it forced the government to reduce the taxation rate. "...the militancy of the peasants had

The militancy of the peasants had

* Raij mel reflects the characteristic feature of the then existing Assamese society. Mel originated from the Khel system of the Ahoms.

alarmed the British Government and it brought down the assessment rate slightly to pacify the peasants.⁸ But the peasants continued to suffer for sometime due to delay in the implementation of this order.

In the middle of nineteenth century, the formation of various sabhas and associations marked the growth of political consciousness in the Brahmaputra Valley. Generally, most of these organizations were of cultural and literary nature, where people assembled together in order to take some important decisions for the welfare of the people or community as a whole. Of course, some associations aimed at arousing political consciousness in the minds of the people.

The 'Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha' was one of the various political organizations which was formed in 1875. Jagannath Barua was the Vice President of this Sabha for nearly five years. He got educated at the Presidency College, Calcutta. He felt the need for

⁸. Ibid., p.63.
forming some organizations in the Brahmaputra Valley, on the lines of Indian Association and British Indian Association which had been formed by middle class in Calcutta. This Sabha opposed the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations of 1886.

'Tezpur Ryot Sabha' was formed by Haribiles Agarwala around 1884. This Sabha was formed mainly to express the grievances of the agricultural ryots against the increase of land revenue by the British. 'The Shillong Association' and the 'Nowgong Ryot Association' were also formed for the same purpose in 1886.

'Assam Desh Hitaishini Sabha' (a welfare association) was formed in 1855 at Sibsagar to study the then prevailing political situation. Puwananda Deka became its secretary in 1856. In 1872, Assamese Literary Society was formed in Calcutta. Jagannath Barua and Manikchandra Barua, belonging to Assamese middle class, submitted memorandum to the Viceroy, Northbrook, in 1872 on behalf of this society. They stressed, inter alia, the need for constructing a Railway line connecting Assam with Bengal.
The 'Gyan Pradayini Sabha' (Society for Disseminating Knowledge) started functioning in Nowgong in the fifties of the nineteenth century under the guardianship of Dhakial Phukan. The aim of this Sabha was to spread knowledge amongst the people.

Leadership of these organizations was restricted to the educated middle class and landed aristocracy. Emergence of these organizations and associations indicated the growth of political consciousness among the people of Brahmaputra Valley in general and middle class in particular. In the absence of well established political parties, these associations and organizations performed these functions which were later taken up by political parties. These organizations acted as a link between government and the masses, because the masses ventilated their grievances to the government through these organizations.

The first group of Assamese middle class which emerged at the end of nineteenth century was high caste Hindus with a background of modern education. The
educated middle class of that period were generally owners of either tea gardens or saw mills or some similar establishments. In course of time, these entrepreneurs involved themselves in various political activities. Representatives of the Assamese intelligentsia included Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hamdhar Barua, Manikchandra Barua, Tarun Ram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Dinanath Bezbarua, Ghanashyam Barua and some others, who owned private landed estates and small or big tea gardens (see appendix).

In the last quarter of nineteenth century some sections of educated Assamese middle class agitated for 'sons of the soil' being given preference in government services. Because at that time high offices in the state were mostly the monopoly of non-Assamese. The number of educated Assamese was less in the state for which non-Assamese (mainly Bengali middle class) were brought from outside to man the administration.

The first and foremost task before the educated Assamese of the period was to educate more and more
Assamese youths for qualifying them to occupy high offices in government services. Due to the consistent effort of the middle class, a number of educational institutions were set up by the end of nineteenth century. The agitation centered in the beginning not so much in capturing a number of posts but in acquiring the means of getting the requisite qualification for them. The last quarter of 19th century, therefore, saw not only an increase in the number of English schools on private enterprise, but also an organized move for the promotion of Collegiate education. Assamese middle class agitated for collegiate education and also for setting up of Gauhati University.

Government, however, did not respond to these demands until Manikchandra Barua, a member of middle class and a distinguished personality of that period emphasized the need in his memorandum of 28 March 1899 for establishment of a college at Gauhati to provide opportunity for higher education to the Assamese youths.  

The agitation by the Assamese middle class for collegiate education led to the establishment of Cotton College at the beginning of the twentieth century. The College was named after Henry Cotton, the then Chief Commissioner.

The dawn of 20th century witnessed the progress of English education which produced many English educated Assamese youths. Female education was neglected at that time as it was commonly considered to be pernicious to the society. But the educated Assamese realised the need of educating the females. In "an anonymous letter, which is supposed to have been written by him in Samachar Darpan (25 August 1832, p.203), it appears that even in that age of extreme conservatism, Haliram advocated the cause of Women's education. Haliram's son, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, sub-assistant, Nowgong, was the true representative of this new awakening.

Christian missionaries tried to set up a few schools for girls. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan acted as a

pace setter by educating the female members of his family. However, the progress of education in Assam throughout 19th century was slow due to various reasons. An important political factor which hindered the growth of education was that the rulers of that period instead of contributing for the growth and development of education, they had to remain busy in suppressing the insurrections of the tribal people.  

Another important factor for the slow progress of education was the medium of instruction in schools. In Assam, education was imparted through the medium of Bengali, which thwarted the spread of education among the Assamese. For this reason also, educational system in Assam could not develop properly throughout nineteenth century. Those who had good financial background could afford to go to Calcutta for higher studies. They emerged as the educated middle-class group.

This group of educated middle class played significant role in eradicating the then existing social
evils. Practice of Polygamy and the widespread addiction to opium were prevalent at that time. The plight of Hindu widows attracted their attention. Some of these intellectuals supported remarriage of widows. Despite then existing orthodoxy of Assamese society, Jadiram Barua himself married a widow, Gunabhiram Barua and Memchandra Barua, both representatives of Assamese middle class, were eminent social reformers. They formed various societies for disseminating the ideas of social reforms, Benudhar Rajkhowa propagated against polygamy.

It was due to the persistent effort of the middle class that a University was established in Assam shortly after independence. Sarat Chandra Goswami struggled for a separate University in Brahmaputra Valley, Gopinath Bordoloi contributed a lot for the success of this movement, which gathered momentum before independence and culminated in the establishment of Gauhati University in 1948. "The movement for a University...

In Assam was a part of the freedom movement".12

The demand for the setting up oil refineries in Assam was also articulated by the Assamese middle class. The oil refineries in Assam were set up after independence mainly towards the later part of second plan period i.e., from 1956-61. The Assam Sahitya Sabha, a literary organisation, also played a significant role in the agitations for establishment of oil refineries in Assam. During the popular agitation in 1956 over the demand for a refinery in Assam, the Sabha played a major role in mobilising public opinion. Peaceful hartal was also observed throughout Assam as part of the agitation for the establishment of oil refineries. Due to the effort of the middle class, the Noonmati Refinery was set up during the third plan period.

The people of Brahmaputra Valley became politically more conscious from the fifties of nineteenth century with the establishment of various associations and organizations. These associations were formed under the leadership of educated middle class to make the people of the Valley politically conscious. Maniram Dasan

and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, both belonging to middle class, were the most active men of the time, when A.J. Moffat Mills came to Assam to enquire about the condition of the people, it was Maniram Deuan and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan who submitted their memorials to Mills for improving the condition of the Assamese society as a whole. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan even made some suggestions to Mills for all round improvement of the Assamese people.

In the article 'Inglendar Vibaran', Anandaram highlighted the backwardness of India as well as Assam by comparing India with England.

Though at the beginning of the British rule, most of the Assamese people had a collaborative attitude, gradually most of them became militant and started playing anti-British role. In the beginning, Maniram Deuan collaborated with the British. Politically many Assamese people had similar attitude. Discouragement of his tea garden enterprise by the British turned Deuan against them. He was executed for participating in the 1857 revolt against British. When Britishers appointed

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the Bangalees from the Sylhet district as Mauzadar in Assam, Maniram Dewan protested against it. However, he was appreciative of the constructive aspects of the British rule in Assam.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the representative of educated Assamese middle class. He was deeply influenced by Bengal renaissance. Some people in Assam also followed its good aspects. This delighted Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. He even wrote to Harshandra Borua (1835–96), a social reformer of that time about it. The process of Bengal renaissance began around 1823–24 and continued till the end of nineteenth century. Despite their hatred for linguistic domination, the Assamese intelligentsia adopted Bengali culture, dress and food habits. Haliram Dhekial Phukan, father of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, played an important role in this process. He wrote a number of articles in Bengali periodicals of that time. The Bengali periodicals like Samachar Darpan, Samachar Chandrika and Masik Patrika had wide circulation in Assam. Haliram Dhekial Phukan also wrote Assam Buranji (or Assam Deesher

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan had a modern outlook and a progressive ideology. He realized the need for importation of technical know-how from Britain and other industrialized countries for the industrial and economic development of Assam. In the 'Observations on the administration of Province of Assam' which Dhekial Phukan submitted to Mills during the latter's visit in 1853, "Phukan not only brought home the authorities the existing evils of the government, but strongly urged reforming measures like the lowering of the taxes, increase in number of the mofussil court, and the native judges...the supervision of the religious and charitable institutions by the Government and the stoppage of the importation of the Abkari Opium".  

The group of educated Assamese who emerged by the end of the nineteenth century sought to express themselves through the use of mass media, with the establishment of

printing press, around 1840's, journalism developed in Assam. Assamese journalism took a well defined shape by the end of 19th century. 'Orunodaya', a monthly magazine, started in 1846, was the pioneer of journalism in the Assam Valley. Numerous monthly and weekly journals, which were mostly edited by educated middle-class people of Assam, appeared by the end of 19th century in order to disseminate scientific knowledge and for giving information to the people on current issues. These journals included 'Assam Bandhu' (1886), 'Jonaki'(1889), Anglo Assamese Weekly Assam News, 'Bijuli'(1891) and some others. The editors were Gunabhiram Barua, Chandra Kumar Agarwala, Hemchandra Barua and Padmanath Gohain Barua respectively. They all belonged to middle class category of the society. They aimed at communicating latest information to the people to increase their awareness.

In order to reuse the spirit of nationalism among the people, sometimes political articles were also published in these journals. Though the articles published were usually moderate in nature, yet, occasionally policies of government, considered
unfavourable to the masses, were condemned through these journals. Hence apparently, though these journals were non-political in character but in reality they aimed at politicizing the people.

The Assamese middle class participated in the electoral politics and legislative process of the country by the beginning of 20th century. The second session of the Indian National Congress which was held in Calcutta in 1886 was participated by representatives of various associations from Assam. 'Shillong Association' was represented by Kalikanta Barakakati, 'Upper Assam Association' was represented by Danishar Barua and Bopinath Bordoloi, Ghanashyam Barua and Manikchandra Barua were some of the most prominent members from among the Assamese middle class to attend the Congress sessions during the years 1886-1905. The various sessions of the Indian National Congress also inspired the Assamese middle class. On 16th December, 1886, a meeting was held in Sylhet where it was decided to reconstitute the Legislative Councils, with not less than two third members to be elected by local bodies. The meeting also
demanded that Indian Civil Service examination be held simultaneously in India and England.

In 1906, Assam was given the right to have two representatives in the 15 member Provincial Council. Because only then it became an integral part of a Lieutenant Governor's province with a Legislative Council. Two seats were allotted to Assam and the members were to be recommended by local bodies and not elected. Thus Assamese community went unrepresented up to 1909. With the Act enlargement of Provincial Council under the Indian Council of 1909, the membership of the Council was increased up to 42, of whom five members represented Assam. Majority of Provincial Council's members were Europeans.

In the early phase of the British rule, Assam was administered by a Commissioner under the Government of Bengal until 1874. Assam was formed into a separate Chief Commissionership in 1874. Again in 1905, some Eastern districts of Bengal were amalgamated with Assam under the name 'Eastern Bengal and Assam'. This partition of Bengal, however, led to a great agitation because of which East and West Bengal were re-united after annulment of the partition in 1912. Assam
Legislative Council was formed in 1912 and elections to it were held in 1912 and 1916. Assam was reconstituted again as a separate province under a Chief Commissioner after 1912. Under the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, Assam was raised to the status of a Governor's province. Montague-Chelmsford Reforms created Executive and Legislative Council in every province. By the Government of India Act of 1935, provincial autonomy was introduced in all the Governor's provinces including Assam. It was put in force in 1937 and continued in existence till 1947.

Twentieth century heralded a new awakening in Assam. The 'Assam Association (1903)', 'The Assam Chatra Sammilan (1916)' and the 'Assam Sahitya Sabha (1917)', were some of the organizations which were formed for preserving socio-cultural identity and protecting the linguistic-cum-demographic majority status of the Assamese.

In Assam in the year 1903, the educated gentry including Manikchandra Barua, Ghanashyam Barua, Jagannath Barua and others formed an All Assam Political
Organization called the Assam Association. Since its inception, the Assam Association served as a spokesman of the people of Brahmaputra Valley for placing their grievances before the government. It was the sole political organization of the valley in early 20th century.

Manikchandra Barua* who started his business in European partnership, was the general secretary of Assam Association. Initially, he collaborated with British but later he protested against unemployment and various other problems of the Assamese. Initially, political views of the members of the association were moderate. But "from 1916 onwards younger men of advanced political views began to enrol themselves as members of the association and give it a new tone and vitality".16

Assam Chatra Sanmilan was another similar organization. Through these associations and organizations, the Assamese people participated in the various political activities of the state in the later part of Colonial Era.

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* See appendix.

In the pre-independence era, Assamese middle class played significant role for wresting independence from the British for India as well as for Assam. They participated in the freedom struggle at the all India as well as at the regional level. Various factors were responsible for developing the spirit of nationalism in the minds of the Assamese people. General economic stagnation and various measures adopted by the British government for their own interest and at the expense of the Assamese were some of the important inputs in the rise of nationalism in the Brahmaputra Valley.

The monopolisation of jobs by Bengalis and the language controversy served as a catalyst in generating the spirit of nationalism among the Assamese people. Assamese nationalism expressed itself in different forms of which linguistic nationalism is the earliest. Of all nationalisms in North East India, the Assamese nationalism is the oldest with a chequered career. It manifested itself in different forms at different times since 1837, linguistic, regional, racial and economic.
The oldest of them was linguistic nationalism”. 19

Thus the freedom movement in Assam gained momentum in the beginning of the present century with the establishment of various new associations. 'The Assam Association', formed in 1903, demanded self-government for India. T.R.Phukan and N.C.Bordoloi were the active politicians of that time. Presiding over the Goalpara session of the Association in December 1918, T.R Phukan openly criticized the government. As the leading political organization, the Assam Association sent some members to give evidence before Mr. Montague, Secretary of State for India, during his visit to India in 1917. T.R.Phukan, N.C.Bordoloi, Chandranath Sharma, Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnu Prasad Medhi and many others who later distinguished themselves as leaders of the freedom struggle under the Congress received their first training in political leadership under the banner of the Assam Association”. 20

Representatives of the Assamese middle class were at the fore front of the nationalist movement in

Assam, the various journals which were published at that time succeeded in making the people politically conscious. 'Assam Bisheshini' edited by Krishnakanta Bhattacharya which appeared in 1914, stood for Swaraj. With the development of journalism in Assamese and English, in the beginning of twentieth century, newspapers and periodicals like the 'Assam Bisheshini', 'the Assam', 'the Advocate of Assam', 'the Assam Mihir', 'the Times of Assam', 'the Usha', and the 'Banti' appeared to rouse the national mind. But only a few of these journals, actively supported the Gandhian movement. These were the 'Assam Bisheshini' (1916–38), 'Asamiya' (1918–48), 'The Advocate of Assam' (1904–7) was the protagonist of swaraj, social reform and educational upliftment. 21

Spirit of nationalism gained momentum with the foundation of Indian National Congress in the year 1885, the impact of which was experienced by the people of Assam. Under the banner of Congress and leadership of Gandhi, people of India as well as Assam fought for independence. Representatives from Assam attended various Congress Sessions. These sessions helped in rousing public consciousness. 21, A.C. Bhuyan & S.P. Das, ed., Assam, pp. 202–203.
national consciousness in the minds of the Assamese people. They felt the necessity of swaraj and struggled for India's Independence. N.C. Bordoloi, T.R. Phukan and Chandranath Sarma were the champions of nationalism in Assam.

The leaders of Assam were influenced by Gandhi. In Assam, N.C. Bordoloi supported the non-co-operation movement in 1920. T.R. Phukan, N.C. Bordoloi, Md. Taibullah, Chandranath Sarma and many other leaders of non-co-operation movement in Assam underwent imprisonment for participating in this movement. Students of Assam Valley joined the non-co-operation movement by abstaining from their classes. Phukan* and Bordoloi induced the students to work for the country. Labourers in tea gardens and other industrial sectors, participated in the non-co-operation movement in Assam. Bordoloi and Phukan involved themselves in the active politics of the Brahmaputra Valley in the 30's of the present century. Both of them were moderate politicians in the beginning. Gradually, they became militant. Their discontentment against the British rule became apparent from the

* See appendix.
speeches which they delivered before the public. They blamed the British for not allowing Indians to rule by themselves. In December 1918, T.R. Phukan presided over the annual conference of the Assam Association at Goalpara. The trend of radicalisation amongst the Assamese middle class got manifested in his speech, in which he blamed the British Government as bad and bureaucratic. At this session Phukan was appointed the new General Secretary. "The replacement of G.S. Barua by Phukan as the new General Secretary and the election of Chandranath Sarma (1889-1922) as one of the Assistant Secretaries of this session indicated the trend of radicalisation within the Assamese middle class."[22]

When Gandhi launched his salt Satyagraha in 1930, Assam Congress also launched the civil disobedience movement simultaneously. In Assam, salt regulations were violated by making salt in the indigenous way. Bishnuram Medhi, President of Assam Provincial Congress, led this movement. The agitation of 1930-32 in Assam followed the pattern of All India movement which included boycott of British goods.

22. A. Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, op. cit., p.115.
On 8th August, 1942, the Congress Working Committee adopted the 'Quit India' resolution. The next day, leading figures of the Congress like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru of the Congress were arrested. Assamese people participated in the historic struggle of 1942. Leading Assamese political figures like Md. Tayebulla, President of Assam Provincial Congress Committee; Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Bishnu Ram Medhi and some other top ranking leaders took part in the 'Quit India Movement'. The Assamese people under the leadership of Assamese educated middle class participated in all phases of the freedom movement.