CHAPTER V

The Press And The Hill People's Demand.

The State of Assam has a unique place in the history of India for its diverse peoples with their different languages, their peculiar customs and simple way of life, and their old history and mythology. Before 1962, there were the State of Assam, and Union Territories of Manipur and Tripura in North-East India. By 1972, Assam was split up into three full-fledged States of the Indian Union and two Union Territories. With the completion of reorganisation process there are at present in the North-East India five States—Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura and two Union Territories—Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as the North-East Frontier Agency or N.E.F. A) and Mizoram (the former Mizo district of Assam) with a common Governor and High Court. The region is strategically placed with common frontiers and with three foreign countries—China, Burma and Bangladesh right right on the border.

The basic objective of the reorganisation was to restructure the administrative arrangements in the region and provide adequate opportunities to the people of the different parts to participate in the task of development of their own territories. It has also a special forum, the North-East Council, in which the
States and Union Territories can discuss and reach agreements on matters of common interest. The completion of the reorganisation scheme was the result of many years of patient and purposeful discussion among the Chief Ministers, Political Leaders, Governor and the Lieutenant-Governors of the region.

What were the reactions of the people, Political leaders and Government of Assam who bore the wrench of separation and truncation with detachment? What was the role of the Press in Assam. How the Press reacted to such unfortunate events? What was the attitude of the Press towards the tribal people in general? Did they fight for the development of tribal areas? What were the views of the Press on the medium of instruction in the tribal areas? How did the Press fight for the preservation of the tribal culture and traditions? Was the attitude of the Press in Assam towards the Hill tribes one of 'Superiority'? These are some of the questions which lie at the root of the Hills - Plains conflict.

Background of conflict between
the Hills and the Plains.

The political awareness had grown among the hill people of North-East India long before the independence of India. In 1946 a Khasi-Jaintia Political Association which was formed at Shillong, submitted a memorandum to
the Secretary of State for India and Cabinet Mission through the Secretary to His Excellency the Governor of Assam stressing that 'the Khasis belong to a race quite distinctly individual from any other race in India living in democratic communes' and expressed their gratitude to the British Crown for preserving their 'individuality' but showed their apprehension for future!

A prominent hill personality, Mac Donald Khar-Kongor after leaving the Congress party founded the Hills' Union with a demand for a Hill State. In his pamphlet, A Case of the Hills Tribes of the North-East Frontier of India (June 1946), he criticised the Government of Assam for lack of development in the hill areas. The North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded and partially Excluded Areas Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee of the Constituent Assembly which visited the hill areas in 1947 observed:

"The Hill people, even in the Excluded Areas, were not found lacking in political consciousness. Perhaps (not without instigation by certain elements), this consciousness was used to instill ideas of an independent status, the external relations under which would be governed by treaty or agreement only."

1. Memorandum by the Secretary, H. Lyngdoh, of the Khasi - Jaintia Political Association, 1946.

In 1964 the Chief Executive Member of the UKJ Hills District Council, B.M. Roy said in the meeting of the Chief Executive Members of all District Councils:

"The number of points for discussion proposed and submitted separately by you conveniently be reduced to and covered by two common points of supreme importance and those points are: (1) Formation of a separate Hills State and (2) Amendment of the Sixth Schedule, which evidently you all have found out by experience does not fully satisfy us because it confers no real autonomy...."

Mr. William A. Sangma, the Chief Executive Member of the Garo Hill District Council, who convened the meeting also said that the attitude of the plainmen was not conducive to unity. He cited a resolution of the Asom Jatiya Mahasobha to the effect that the areas opposed to Assamese as a State language should be severed from Assam. He said that if this was the attitude of the plainmen there was no alternative but demanding a Hill State. Mr. William Sangma's apprehension was based on facts. The Asom Jatiya Mahasobha made statements on several occasions that the Assamese should be the only State language of Assam. On March 29, 1948 Nilmoni Phukan, a leading public

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4. *Memorandum to the States Reorganisation Commission submitted by Hill Peoples of the Autonomous Districts, Shillong, 1964*
in Assam, said that the Assamese 'alone' would be the State language of Assam and the State of Assam must not 'nourish' any other language in the province.

As a result the Eastern India Tribal Union, (FITU) which was born at Aijal on October, 1966, demanded a separate State for the hills people before the State Reorganisation Commission when it visited Assam. But the demand of the E.I.T.U. was not conceded by the State Reorganisation Commission. Later on the E.I.T.U. expressed its dissatisfaction and concern at the S.R.C.'s inability "to appreciate the aspiration and demand of the tribal people of this part of the country" and called for the "bringing of all hills under one administration."

On April 1960 the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (A.P.C.C) declared that the Assamese should be the State language of Assam. The immediate reaction to this decision was the meeting of All Assam Hill Leaders Conference at Tura on April 28 under the Chairmanship of Rev. B.M. Pugh who was the President of FITU. The conference vehemently opposed the decision of the APCC to make Assamese the only State language. The leaders also decided to form the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) which played a vital role in the formation of Meghalaya. The language riot that broke out on June 1960

7. Resolution No.1(a) passed at the Aijal Conference, FITU, 1966
gave further momentum to the demand for a separate "hill state." Dr. V. Venkata Rao said: "The amount of damage caused by the language movement was enormous. As a matter of fact the cause itself suffered... And the process of disintegration of the state began. It gave birth to the ..."

The declaration of Assamese language as the state language of Assam gave birth not only to the AIHLC but it also united the hill leaders who were in disarray earlier. Dr. Chaube observed: "The hill state movement was not really born until the middle of 1960, when the hill parties were in real disarray. It was the language issue which helped them to unite on a common platform, following the outbreak of violence between the Assamese speaking and Bengali-speaking communities in the Assam plains."

Newspapers' support to Assamese Language Bill.

When the hill people were unitedly agitating against the APCC's decision to make Assamese the only state language, the newspapers in Assam instead of playing a constructive role had completely ignored the demand of the hills people. The newspapers had also fallen in line with the APCC and Assam Jatiya Mahasabha. The various columns of the newspapers—daily or weekly— including the editorial filled up with the demand for immediate introduction of Assamese as the only state


language in Assam. On June 25, 1960 the Assam Tribune in its editorial said:

"The decision of the Government of Assam as contained in a Press statement of the Chief Minister, Sri Bimala Prasad Chaliha, to introduce a Bill in the next session of the State Assembly to declare Assamese as the State language of Assam will be widely hailed. The Bill, it was further revealed, would be on the lines of the recommendations of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee. The paper further said that those who opposed the introduction of Assamese were "proceeded from either ignorance and prejudice or from political motives". Like the Assam Tribune, the Natun Assamiya and the Janambhumi also hailed the APCC's decision and demanded 'immediate' introduction of Assamese in the educational institutions.

Only July 6, 1960 the Assam Tribune in its editorial captioned 'Reconstitution of Assam' put forward a 'permanent solution' to the problem arising out of the imposition of Assamese as the State language. The paper virtually gave a green signal to hill areas and the district of Cachar to sever themselves from Assam if they were not prepared to accept the Assamese language. It said "a permanent solution which however painful it may seem, lies in the reconstitution of the State of Assam with the six plains districts and the Mikir Hills. Seventy five per cent of the people of the Assam Valley are Assamese and 80 per cent know Assamese. A resolution for such a reconstituted
State, it is reported, is likely to be moved in the next session of the Assembly. We have no doubt that the move will have the unanimous support of the Assamese people. As for those people who have always demanded such separation, they must welcome the move as the fulfilment of their long cherished dream. The similar view was expressed through the 'letter to editor' column. L.C. Barua, now the president of Assam Yuwak Samaj, one of the organisations which is agitating currently on the 'foreign national' issue, said in a letter to editor in the Assam Tribune on June 25, 1960 that in view of the hill people's agitation against the declaration of Assamese as the State language "a separate Hill State including Cachar or Purbachal may be constituted as a separate administrative unit". He further said "if such separation be effected, then Assam with six plains districts" would be financially a gainer.

Hill People's Reaction to Assamese Language

This kind of attitude of the newspaper of Assam towards the non-Assamese and hills people in particular created an unprecedented fear of losing the cultural identity in the minds of the hills people. They thought that both the Government and Press of Assam were adopting an 'imperialistic design' towards the hills. It is important to mention here that the APHLC did not demand for a separate Hill State in its meeting at Tura on July 6-7, 1960
but they demanded that the Assamese Language should be dropped and English should continue as the official language of Assam. The APHILC in its resolution said:

"(a) The position and conditions of the Hills people in Assam are such that the acceptance of the Assamese language now or at any time, which would place the Assamese in a more dominant position, will lead to the assimilation of all the Hills people in the Assamese community, thereby gradually leading to the disintegration of their identity as distinct communities in India, which identity has been given recognition and protection under the Constitution.

(b) The imposition of the Assamese language will overburden the Hills people with too many languages (Hindi, the vernacular, English and Assamese) in different scripts.

(c) The adoption of Assamese as the official language of the State will adversely affect the opportunities and prospects of the Hills people in the Government Services and other avocations notwithstanding any amount of safeguards which can always be circumvented."
(d) There is no justification for the declaration of Assamese as the official language even from the population point of view, as less than fifty per cent of the population have Assamese as the mother tongue.

(e) The move has already created discord, disruption and violence among the different language groups of the State thereby defeating the very purpose which an official language is intended to serve.

(f) The imposition of the language by law will create more chaos and insecurity in this frontier State, which will be catastrophic especially in view of the Chinese aggression.

(g) Assam being India in miniature, inhabited by people of diverse races, cultures and languages, the proper official language should be Hindi. Meanwhile, English should continue as the official language until such time as the people of the State are ready to adopt Hindi as the official language."

But the newspapers did not at any time make it a point that the APHILC gave up their demand for a separate Hill State and hence the problem stood on a different footing.

What the newspapers did was that they made language an issue of life and death before their Assamese readers who are habitually sensitive to their own language. As a result, the public opinion was too high in favour of immediate implementation of the Assamese Language Bill. At this juncture the APFLC met at Shillong on August, 1960 and authorised the Council of Action "to prepare a plan or pattern of separation, to submit the same to all political parties and District Councils in the Autonomous Hill Districts of Assam."

**NEWSPAPERS' PROPAGANDA**

What was more damaging was that instead of finding out the real cause behind the hill people's demand for a separate hill state, the newspapers made a third party a scapegoat who were held responsible for the whole movement. The Assam Tribune on June 2, 1960 said:

"The Shillong demonstration might appear to be the honest rumblings of some linguistic minorities, but there is ample ground for the belief that it is a deliberate move of a section of Bengalees still dreaming of 'Greater Bengal' to rope in the simple Khasis in staging an agitation against Assamese being declared the State language."

Again on June 25, 1960 The Assam Tribune said:

"it is now abundantly clear, it is the political motives of the few which have played on the ignorance

11. Ibid, Appendix B
and prejudice of a section of the hill tribals to stir up opposition to the nature aspiration of the overwhelming majority of the people of this State to see Assamese elevated to its rightful place as the State language of Assam. . . . The unpleasant truth about the opposition to the demand, which we do not want to elaborate is that it is mainly sponsored by a minority of migrants who have forgotten the lessons of history to resume their ancient role of leader of the opposition to the progress and development of this State.

Similarly the Natun Assamiya and Jansabhumi accused the Bengalees and 'Calcutta newspapers' with filthy language of the 'anti-Assamese' agitation in hill areas. According to these papers 'Bengalees and Calcutta newspapers were instigating the hill people' against the Assamese people. This kind of constant accusation of the Bengalees and Calcutta newspapers is a peculiar phenomenon of the Assamese journalism which owed to a great extent for its growth and development to the journalism of Bengal. In most cases the newspapers of Assam may scan to be nothing but an appendage to the Calcutta newspapers.

Influence of Christian Missionaries

Since long the Christian missionaries have yielded tremendous influence upon the tribal people of the

North-East India. This is amply proved by the fact that the religion of the hills people is Christianity and the medium of instruction is English. Many a time the activities of the missionaries in the hill areas of this region came in for severe criticism in the Government circles both Central and provincial and they were accused of 'instigating' the hill people against the Government of India and implanting a 'separatist' tendency in the hill people. In this context Dr. V. Venkata Rao said:

"The Government of Assam also stated that the Christian missions were responsible for generating the separatist tendency in the tribals. They were also responsible for westernisation which was not conducive for the integration of the tribals with the main stream. I discussed this question with Rev. Sairema of the Welsh Mission at Aizawal. He informed the present writer that except one no one taught the faithful to secede from the Indian Union. . . . The contention that the Christian Missions were responsible for the separatist tendency among the tribals is not tenable."

Although Dr. Rao said that the 'Christian Missions' were not responsible but the fact remains that at least a section of missionaries was highly responsible for instigating the hill people. Knowing fully well that the elite of the hill people were more tilted towards the British culture. . . .

administration, a few British official like Parry, Robert Reid and Button tried to convert the hill areas into 'Crown Colony at the time of independence of India. However, the plot failed. It was also a fact that a section of the middle class hill people and chiefs because of their long association with the British Raj did not like to join with Indian Union. A secret plot to persuade the Khasi States to accede to Pakistan was frustrated by Akbar Hydari, the Governor of Assam, in 1947. The ring leaders of the plot were Nichols Roy, a member of the Congress Ministry and a leader who spearheaded the movement for a separate hill state later on, and Abdul Matin, a Muslim League M.L.A. of Sylhet. The hesitant Chiefs of Cherra, Mylliem and Jhyrim and their followers, twenty states in all, were compelled by the Governor of Assam, to change their minds. They signed the instrument of accession on December 15, 1947 in favour of Union of India.

Emergence of Hill Middle Class

The conflict between the plains and the hills widened further with the emergence of the middle class hills people who wanted a share in the political and economic fields. The language issue provided the ground for Hill state movement

14. Das, D., Savar Patel's Correspondence, Hydari to Patel, P.43
but the real cause was economic. Dr. Chauhe also said:

"The outstanding aspect of the hills problem is political, the economic foundations of which can be traced not only in 'the Hills peoples' long-standing grievances' but also in the aspirations for a new destiny. In short, the hills problem is a problem of growth which under special circumstances, has been articulated in political movements."

The hill leaders were thoroughly dissatisfied with the valley politicians because of the step-motherly attitudes towards the development of the hill areas. They were deprived of the right to administer their own hill areas. The then Chief Minister, Bishnu Medhi, did not allot the portfolio of Tribal Affairs to Nicholas Roy, who later on resigned from the Congress and joined the APHLC. The late Govind Ballabh Pant, who was then the Union Home Minister, had to intervene to allay the misgivings of the hills people. He persuaded the hill leaders to join the Chaliha Ministry by placing the department of Tribal Affairs under the charge of one of the hill leaders. But even this arrangement proved a failure. The Council of Action, APHLC observed:

"This arrangement was neither an easy nor a happy one and Captain Williamson Sangma (the Minister in charge of Tribal Affairs who later became Chief Minister of Meghalaya) was

confronted with indifference, non-cooperation and even hostility from some of his cabinet colleagues and the whole arrangement was contemptuously dubbed by the Assamese politicians as a "State within a State". Hitches were created and intensified, and the situation reached a climax when, in 1960, the Assamese dominated State Government pushed through a Bill in the Assam Legislative Assembly declaring Assamese as the sole official language of the State in the teeth of united opposition from the Hills. Captain Williamson Sangma and his EITU associates resigned from the ministry and the hill people took this as the last straw that broke the camel's back.

Creation of Nagaland

The creation of Nagaland as a separate State on August, 1960, had further strengthened the demand of the A.E.H.C. for a Hill State. It may be mentioned here that the demand for the separation of Naga Hills was more a 'political' than economic one. The study team of the A.E.H.C. observed: "Nagaland is in a class by itself. It was given statehood on purely political grounds without any consideration for financial viability". (Report of the Study Team; Administrative Reforms Commission's on Administration of Union Territories and N.E.F.A., New Delhi, September, 1968). Since June 1947, Nagas have been demanding the separation of Naga Hills district.

from India. On August 1, 1960, the Prime Minister Nehru announced in Parliament that Government had decided to make Nagaland a State— the 16th State in the Indian Union. On December 1, 1963 the State was inaugurated by the President of India.

What is most significant is the choosing of time for the declaration of a separate State for the Nagas on August 1, when the attentions of both the people and the Press of Assam were drawn to the most sensitive language issue and at a moment when the entire North-East India was rocked by the communal violence. In normal circumstances, this would have made newspaper headlines. But in the context of the language issue, the declaration of a separate State of Nagaland which was within Assam received scant notice in the newspapers of this region. There was no commotion or agitation in the Press. But this should not make any one wander. Because the newspapers of Assam along with Asom Jatiya Mahasobha extended a full support to the Nagas for self determination. On January 3, 1948, Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhuri sent wire to the President of the Naga National Council conveying Mahasobha’s sincere support to the Naga stand. It may be mentioned here that Nagas wanted (majority of them still want) to secede from India to make Nagaland a complete sovereign independent country. The Assam newspapers, which stood more as a mouthpiece of the Asom Jatiyatabadi, a chauvinistic element, than newspapers having independent

17. The Assam Tribune, January 4, 1948
policies of their own, tried to act as an agent of the Naga National Council.

The separation of any kind is really a painful one. But the Press of this region accepted the separation of Nagaland as a fait accompli. On November 12, 1963, the Assam Tribune, the only premier English daily of Assam in its editorial "congratulated" the Nagaland Administration for its speedy arrangement for the first general elections in Nagaland. It said:

"The Nagaland Administration is to be congratulated on the speed with which it has completed all arrangements for the State's first General Election. . . . But it is now a matter of gratification as such to the Nagas as to their fellow citizens in the rest of India that a new life is set for Nagaland from December 1 next—the day when she becomes a full-fledged State like other States of this big country".

On December 1, 1963, the day President Radhakrishnan inaugurated the State of Nagaland, the Assam Tribune in its editorial appreciated the Government of India for the "highly imaginative and thoroughly democratic policy" in giving the Nagas the "fullest opportunity" for self-expression. It said:

"The inauguration of the new State of Nagaland today by President Radhakrishnan is a landmark in the annals of India. The occasion symbolises the normal
climaxing of the highly imaginative and thoroughly
democratic policy of the Government of India to give
tribal people the fullest opportunity for self-expression.
It will be revealed that the first step towards the
formation of the State was taken in 1967 when the Naga
Hill-Tuensang areas came into being as a separate area
for administrative reasons.

After expressing 'happiness' on the occasion of the
inauguration of the separate Nagaland, the Assam Tribune
came forward to help the newly born State. "Assam and other
States of the Eastern Zone", the paper said, "will be happy
to render any assistance to the new State, specially in the
field of technical and trained personnel."

But the activities of the Naga underground came in
for severe criticism in the newspapers of the region. The
Assam Tribune in its editorial on December 19, 1963
expressed "concern" at the outbreak of Naga hostilities. It
said:

"No doubt the concern will be shared by the public
at large, particularly by the people of Assam. The
hostiles, it is said, were actually on their way
to East Pakistan... to lift the arms supplied by
the Pakistan Government. It is also suspected that
the hostiles are planning large-scale disturbances
during the general elections due to be held in the
middle of next month."
The *Aga Bani*, an Assamese Weekly, went to a step further. It suggested a strong action in bringing the Naga rebels under control. It recalled late Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and his firm policy of annexing the princely States into the Indian Dominion. It said:

"The latest demand of the underground Nagas have compelled the Indians to recall late Sardar Patel and his policy. After independence Sardar Patel who has been known as 'iron-man' annexed the princely States of India with strong hand. If Sardar Patel's Policy would have been accepted by the (then) Prime Minister Nehru in the case of Kashmir also, there would not have been any Kashmir problem by now."

The paper further warned that if the Government of India do not take strong action against the Naga rebels, the Government would be held responsible before the public. It said:

"Even after the Government of India's liberal policy towards the Naga rebels, they (Naga hosiles) are bringing India into disrepute in the international field. Under the circumstances if the Government of India do not take firm policy in quelling the rebels, the Government of India will be held responsible to the people of India."
Hill State.

On June 10, 1963 a delegation of A.P.H.L.C. met the Prime Minister Nehru in Delhi for the realization of their demand for a separate Hill State. A plan known as Nehru Plan emerged out of this meeting. The Government of Assam and A.P.C.C. vehemently opposed this plan. Both the Government and A.P.C.C. observed that the Nehru Plan would undermine its unity and integrity, it would affect the democratic form of Government, it would destroy the functioning of the Cabinet as a team with collective responsibility to the State Legislature.

But the reaction of the Nehru Plan in the Hills was quite different from that of the plains. The plan was immediately accepted by the District Congress Committee of the K & J. Hills and the Assam Hill People's Convention. On April 17, 1964, the A.P.H.L.C. in its meeting promised to give a 'trial' to the P.M.'s plan of full autonomy and requested him to proceed with the appointment of the Commission to work out the implementation of the proposed plan.

Meanwhile, the newspapers in the plains were highly critical of the Nehru Plan. The Assam Tribune in its editorial captioned 'Nehru Plan' on December 25, 1963 said: "The Plan involves a question of vital concern to the people of Assam" and "it is extraordinary that the people of Assam have not been taken into confidence and the Assam
Assembly has not even been sounded". It further said that it was not "clear if even the Chief Minister of Assam was consulted". Again, on December 28, 1963, the Assam Tribune in its editorial said that the Nehru Plan was "an undemocratic plan". It said:

"The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee has rightly and forcefully questioned the authority of the All Party Hill Leaders' Conference to speak solely on behalf of the Hills people. Now that the Assam Assembly has also expressed its view and the A.P.H.L.C. too has given its firm opinion on the Nehru Plan.... But we feel that in hatching a solution of this kind there should be less secrecy than was unfortunately noticed in respect of the Nehru Plan".

**Pataskar Commission**

After the death of Nehru on May 27, 1964, his successor Lal Bahadur Shastri appointed the Commission on March 16, 1966 with N.V. Pataskar as Chairman, Shankar Prasad and G.S. Rau as members. The Pataskar Commission, which submitted its report on March 1966, suggested the appointment of a Minister for the hill areas and such other Ministers of State, but did not plead for a separate Hill State as demanded by the A.P. H.L. C. The Commission felt that the basic problem of the hill areas was that of economic development for which the two regions of Assam - the hill areas and
the plains - were interdependent. The Commission also said that as far as practicable the general economic condition of the hill areas should be raised to the level of that of the plains within reasonable period of time. The Commission further observed that the links of the hills with the plains constituted a factor of importance to both of them, and there was a great need for preserving these links. The people of the plains highly appreciated recommendations of the Commission. The Government of Assam and A.P.C.C. had also accepted Commission's recommendations. The newspapers of the plains, although they accepted the recommendations of the Pataskar Commission, hesitated to accept the suggestion for creation of a separate Tribal Area Department to look after the Hill Districts. They treated it as a "separate wing grown out of the revenue of Assam". K.C. Barua, the President of Assam Yuvaak Samaj, in an article in the Assam Tribune said: "The Government were treating the Hill Tribals as a separate entity, different from the people of the plains including the plains Tribals? So it appears that neither the Press nor the people of the plains stood in favour of the fulfilment of the aspirations of the hill people.

The A.P.H.L.C. rejected the recommendations of the Commission on the ground that it adopted a partisan attitude in favour of the State Government of Assam. Meanwhile, A.P.H.L.C spearheaded a strong agitation for the realisation of their demand for a separate Hill State. It also is to be noted here

that the (hills people or ) Eastern India Tribal Union, a regional party contested election in 1967 on this emotional issue - separate Hill State. Since 1962 the A.P.J.I.C. has been contesting election on the same issue - separate State for Hills people and they won a sweeping victory in elections.

Federal Plan

On December 29, 1966, the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi invited the A.P.J.I.C. to Delhi for discussion on January 11, 1967. The A.P.J.I.C. accepted the invitation and decided to keep the agitation in abeyance and that in the event of failure of Delhi talks agitation would be launched for immediate fulfilment of their demands. The A.P.J.I.C. leaders also requested the Government of India to postpone general elections in the hill districts and that in case the elections were held they would boycott the Assembly elections. On January 13, 1967, the Government of India announced its decision to reorganise the State of Assam on the basis of a federal structure giving equal status to the hill areas with the rest of the State of Assam.

The Government of India Press Note issued on that date said:

"The Prime Minister and the Home Minister have held detailed discussions with the leaders of the A.P.J.I.C. The Government of India appreciated the political aspirations of the people of the hill areas of Assam.
and have decided to reorganise the State of Assam."

The A.P.N.L.C. welcomed the federal plan and decided to participate in the Committee composed of representatives of the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and the A.P.N.L.C. to be set up to work out the details of the plan. Asima Mehta, then Minister of the Government of India for Petroleum and Chemicals and Social Welfare, was appointed as the Chairman of the Committee. All the members were, according to the Committee, opposed to the idea of a federation as they considered that it would lower the present status of the State of Assam and subsequently pave the way for the disintegration of the State. The Committee came to the consensus: a federal structure should not be the basis of reorganisation of the present State of Assam, while the Committee considered the unity and integrity of the present State of Assam as essential for the interests of the plains and hills, it recommended the maximum autonomy to the hill areas. The recommendations of the Committee could not satisfy the A.P.N.L.C. So the A.P.N.L.C. rejected it. But the people as well as the Press of the plains were highly satisfied with the report of the Committee.

It is to be observed that the announcement of reorganisation plan on January 13, 1967 led to vigorous movement mostly organised by the students and political parties against the plan. Meetings and Seminars were held in different parts of Assam to oppose the plan. The agitation gained momentum with Mrs. Indira Gandhi's statement at Jorhat that
the Mehta Committee did not satisfy the aspirations of the hill people. The movement reached its climax when the Students Organisation gave a call for 'boycotting' the Republic day—January 26, 1966. This had caused widespread violence which marked the Republic day. The announcement of reorganisation of Assam by the Government of India caught a banner headline in the Assam Tribune on January 14, 1967. On January 16, three days after the declaration of federal plan, the Assam Tribune wrote a very lengthy editorial captioned 'Partition of Assam' which had been continued for three consecutive days (January 16, 17 and 18). In this unusually lengthy editorial the paper made some contradictory opinions on the federal plan. On one hand it said that the federal plan would be a "source of constant conflict" between the federating units and hence the people of Assam should resist it, and on the other hand the paper itself accepted the federal plan since it was 'a fait accompli.' It said:

"We strongly feel that the so-called federal structure as contemplated by New Delhi without having regard to political dangers inherent in any novel plan with unsure results must be abandoned forthwith, if that is not done and the federation idea contained in the Home Ministry's statement of January 13, is perused that may well become a source of constant conflict between the federating units and may even provide them scope for further disintegration of the region at all stages of bargaining among its constituents."
The paper gave a clarion call to the people as well as leaders of Assam to "awake and arise" and 'oppose' the federal plan if they wanted to 'survive'. It said:

"What we would like to emphasise is the fact that for Assam the next six months will be crucial time. Let the people and their leaders take cognisance of it if they want to survive".

In the same editorial the paper expressed another opinion, which is quite different from the above call which reads as: "This is now a fait accompli which the people of Assam and its Government have to accept although they have been resisting the move for a separate Hill State over the last six years or so".

Even the Government of Assam and the A.P.C.C. were in a fix as to whether to accept the federal plan or to reject it. The fact remains that the Executive Committee of the A.P.C.C. met on April 7, three months after the announcement of the federal plan and resolved to oppose the federal plan on the grounds of unity, security, integrity and requested the Government of India to accept the recommendations of the Patakar Commission. The 'popular opposition' against the federal plan was so strong that even the Government of Assam and the A.P.C.C. had to surrender themselves to it. Although the A.P.C.C.'s hesitancy to accept or not to accept the federal plan struck the newspapers' eyes, yet they were quite late in bringing it before the public. The Assam Tribune reported it only on January 16, 1968;
Initially the State Government of Assam and the A.P.C.C. exhibited Hamletian hesitancy to accept or not the federal plan. But the popular opposition to the January 13 announcement had become so irresistible that the Assam Government and the A.P.C.C. had to line up with the people and they too discarded their posture of indecision. Policy-makers in New Delhi afterwards realised that the regional federal plan was not worthwhile in the least and they seemingly sought to find out a basis for an agreed formula acceptable to both the parties involved.

So this is another case where the Government and political parties yielded to popular pressure.

Most interestingly, the newspapers did not stand in the way to the fulfilment of the aspirations of the hills people. They had no objection if Assam was 'clearly' divided and a separate hill State was created for the hills people. What the papers objected to was that the plain districts should not suffer in 'status' by being made to join a federation. The Assam Tribune said on January 16, 1967:

"The plain people would certainly extended goodwill to their brethren in the hill but why the people of the plain should suffer in status by being made to join a federation of novel nature is not understandable. Let the hillmen be happy with their long-awaited State and the plainmen with what remains of Assam after the hill districts leave the parent State as it is constituted..."
today. What the plain districts would insist on is that there should be no piecemeal solution of the hills and plain problem through a new, unclear and indeed doubtful experiment as the Government of India has hatched."

"The parties concerned", the Assam Tribune said on January 17, 1967 "should in our view accept the fact of an outright partition of Assam into clear and well defined separate States as was done in the case of say, Gujarat and Maharashtra." It further said though parting is always a matter of sadness, it could be a bridge of understanding provided it was not hedged in by risky experimentation of a federal idea. The paper severely resented that the capital of Assam be still at Shillong in the "garb" of a federal seat.

The main concern of the most of the newspapers of the plain was for the six districts of Brahmaputra valley. To keep a separate 'status' of All India level for this valley, they were prepared to accept the partition of Assam, if necessary. The reorganisation plan was opposed since it hampered the integrity and status of Assam as a State within the constitution of India.

The Dainik Assam on January 11, 1967 accused the Government of India for giving unnecessary 'importance' to the demand of the A.P.H.L.C. The paper said that there were many differences among the hills people themselves. According to the paper it was because of Government's indulgence, the A.P.H.L.C could build up an image of its own among the hills people of various languages and having different interests. On January 16
1907, three days after the declaration of the federal plan, the *Dainik Assam* said in its editorial that "Assam would turn into a second grade State in India under the federal plan". The paper regarded the plan as "a State within a State". It is very interesting how the daily looked at the plan:

"For the sake of defence, territorial integrity and economic development, Assam have to come forward to sacrifice herself like a goat at the communion table under this plan".

The weeklies were also in line with the dailies. The three important weeklies of Assam - *Hilachal, Assam Patrika* and *Janamkhumi* - opposed the federal plan as it would, according to them, undermine the "status" of Assam.

On December 26, 1967, the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi made a statement at Jorhat on the reorganisation of Assam in which she reported to have said that the Mehata Committee's recommendations did not offer a solution to the hills problem. Editorialising her Jorhat statement, the *Assam Tribune*, on January 9, 1968 said that her (Mrs. Gandhi's) statement was 'highly deplorable' and this had thrown a challenge to the people of Assam. The paper was also very critical of S.S.P. for their withdrawal of support for the Mehata Committee's recommendations.

The *Assam Tribune* in a very catchy editorial headline: 'A Year of protests!' on January 16, 1968 gave a rousing call to the people of Assam to resist the federal plan tooth and nail.
It said:

"This day, a year ago, we strongly reacted to the Government of India's decision to reorganise the State of Assam on the basis of a regional federation. Pointing out that the die was cast and that Assam's disintegration was in the offing, we called upon the people to unsettle a settled fact as we saw in the plan a host of potential dangers to the very existence of Assam as a full-fledged State. It is a matter of satisfaction that our call has been responded to in full measure by the people who have risen against the January 13 announcement as "yes" and "no man's" - the three memorable words with which Gandhiji had inspired the Assam people to fight the monster of the Grouping plan sponsored by the then British Government to forcibly seat Assam in a Muslim majority group. It was pointed out in this column on more than one occasion that the federal plan was hardly a lesser evil."

The editorial column of Assam Tribune not only expressed the views of its own on the reorganisation issue but also served as a forum for ventilating the grievances of the A.P.C.C. against State Reorganisation plan. On January 23, 1966 the Assam Tribune in an attractive editorial headline 'The A.P.C.C. Warning' said:

"The warning sounded by the joint meeting of the executives of the A.P.C.C. and the Congress Parliamentary party held in the Congress Bhawan on January 21, that
any solution on the basis of so-called federation
or a separate Hill State or States or Union Territory
will not only spell ruin to this area but also
release forces of disintegration in other parts of
the country."

On January 26, 1968, the Republic Day, the *Assam
Tribune* expressed its concern on the 'Political Future'
of Assam. It said that Assam had joined the country in the
celebration but while doing so, she was conscious of the
'big question mark' that overhung her 'political destiny:
The past year had been particularly anxious for Assam with
Centre's vacillation about her political future—the paper
said.

The *Natun Assam*, a fortnightly, expressed similar
views like those of the *Assam Tribune* and *Daunik Assam*. It
had stubbornly opposed the reorganisation of Assam. In its
views the implementation of the federal plan would undermine
the status and position of Assam as a State. Like other
papers, the *Natun Assam* was also highly critical of Prime
Minister Indira Gandhi for her statement at Jorhat on December
26, 1967 on the reorganisation of Assam. It made a sweeping
attack on Mrs. Gandhi in its editorial on January 2, 1968.
Again on January 17, 1968, *Natun Assam* lashed at the
Government for ignoring the interest of Assam and wishes of
her people. It urged upon the people of Assam to come forward
and face the challenge of the federal plan.
The *Namam Assaiva* like the *Assam Tribune* and *Dainik Assam* also expressed its "happiness" over the people's 'resentment' against the plan. It extended its support to the "Assam Unity day" observed in Assam as a mark of protest against the reorganisation scheme. The newspapers in the plain (Assam Valley) - big or small - daily or weekly - came forward to register their protest against the federal plan through their various columns. Identical views were expressed in the 'letter to the editor', feature and editorial columns. These columns always supported the popular opposition organised by the various students and political organisations against the reorganisation move.

Thus the newspapers not only get themselves involved in the movement but also took a leading part. They created such a situation that the agitating people lost all their reasons and good sense. They incited people with their inflated news and views and did not give the movement a proper perspective. As a result the "Assam Unity day" turned into a big communal violence day leading to an attack on the minority communities who were mostly businessmen from Rajastahan and U.P. It was really unfortunate that the Republic Day of January 26, 1968 was marked by burning of national flag, showing disrespect to the national anthem, and communal violence.

The declaration by the Government of India on September 11, 1966 for the creation of an autonomous Hills State within Assam was another momentous event for the newspaper of Assam. The news was splashed with banner headline and
editorials were written expressing "relief" and "satisfaction" over the announcement. The newspapers said that the uncertainties about the future of Assam, the growing tension among the various groups of people living in the strategic State and the widening misunderstanding between the hillmen and the plain people would gradually disappear. On September 12, 1969, the Assam Tribune said:

"The decision to set up an autonomous Hill State within the State of Assam for Khasia and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills districts giving the Mikir and North Cachar Hills an option to join the Hill State with 2/3 majority of their respective District Council should find acceptance with those who sincerely desire the integrity of Assam and at the larger autonomy for the hill people."

Creation of Meghalaya

On November 10, 1970, the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi announced in the Lok Sabha the acceptance in principle by the Government of India of Meghalaya's demand for full statehood. The newspapers in the plain welcomed the declaration. Big or small - all newspapers extended a sincere "congratulation" to the newly born State and expressed a hope that a good neighbourly relation would be maintained between the plains and hills. They also expressed the hope that the shifting of the capital of Assam from Shillong should not cause misunderstanding between the newly born and parent State.
The study reveals that any plan which was likely to hamper the 'status' or 'position' of the Brahmaputra Valley - politically and economically - was doggedly resisted by the newspapers - big or small - of the plains. To maintain the so-called status of the Assam Valley the newspapers were even prepared to accept the partition of Assam.

They welcomed the Government of India's declaration for the creation of an autonomous Hill State within Assam. The newspapers whether big or small had always supported the popular movement launched by the students and politicians against the reorganisation of Assam. They gave a clarion call to the people of the plains to resist any reorganisation of Assam stubbornly. They remained always with the aspirations of the people of the plains or Brahmaputra Valley. The political and economic aspirations of the hills people were completely ignored by the plains newspapers. As a result they had no impact upon the hills people. The hills people held the plains newspapers responsible for suppression of their legitimate aspirations. This widened the gap between the plains and the hills and created more misunderstanding than unity. The newspapers - both English and Assamese - failed to play a role for keeping the plains and the hills together. With their blind and aggressive support to the demand of the plains, the newspapers always championed the cause of the Assamese people only. The national integration and interest were subordinated by the Assam Press to the chauvinistic Assamese nationalism.