CHAPTER-IV
ASSAM TANGLE
Setting aside their ethnic origins for the occasion, the Indian people rose as one man developing a consciousness of nationhood-in their fight against the imperialistic power to gain independence. This was amply brought out by Guha, who commenting on the Bengali vis-a-vis Assamese relations in the Assam, remarked: "even as the two regional middle classes worked together and combined to confront imperialism at the political level, they also fought each other (italics mine) for jobs, land and hegemony over local culture and politics".¹ So lurking behind the ideal of unity is the chimera of homogeneity, an unattainable and, for many plural polities, self-destructive objective. Little wonder the dawn of independence was a forced witness to cracks appearing in the solidarity or oneness of the national consciousness achieved. As Phadnis opined, "the diversities demanded more space in the form of autonomy and if they were pushed and squeezed-in, their stridence at times was so intense as to crack if not break the mould".² Nowhere has the stridency more clearly visible than in the Assamese movement which appeared, in fact, to be heading to break the mould of the Indian nation. The widespread notion of economic progress as a rationalising instrument out to make affective sentiments redundant, appears to be a failure yet again in the light of an agitation in Assam. The saliency of ethnicity over class is not


surprising considering the asset of ethnicity 'to combine an interest with an affective tie' as witnessed in the case of Assam. Perhaps Assam shnres with Punjab the distinction of undergoing a stupendous population composition initially as a result of colonial administrative designs and subsequently in the post-independence as a result of new domains of autonomy carved out and granted to various hill areas marked by the federal authority. This Chapter deals with the Assam movement. The how and why of it in the broader framework.

In Assam we face a peculiar situation in which the issue at stake appears to be not the creation of a new state but rather the control of resources within the state and access to national resources by those who consider themselves authentic or genuine Assamese. It is this peculiar situation of Assam that we deal with in this chapter. It examines the various causes for the rise of the Ahomiya movement- the causes for the forgotten and neglected feelings. It also deals with the injustice or parochial mentality exhibited by the plains-Assamese towards their hill tribals, ironically these are the same allegations leveled by plains-Assamese towards the Bengalis, sparking-off the sub-regional movement, Bodoland.

4Ibid., p.154.
In order to have a proper understanding of the Ahom movement it is appropriate to have a brief historical sketch of its origins. This chapter is roughly subdivided into three phases. Phase-I makes a historical overview of the movement beginning from the Ahom invasion till Independence in 1947. Although they managed to assimilate the Ahoms, the rulers from the thirteenth century, the situation was markedly different in the colonial period as the fears and apprehensions of their getting assimilated into the vast Bengali immigrant community, this time, was not far fetched. However with the advance of freedom there apparently was no respite as they continued to experience successive reorganisations in the hope of having a State all of their own. This problem was further compounded with the undeterred mass exodus from the erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. It is precisely this scenario, the post-Independent Indian Assam that the second phase discusses. The final phase—the third, depicts the situation in the aftermath of the Assam Accord finalised in 1985.

The Ahomiya movement
Phase-I: From the Ahom invasion-1947:

This phase seeks to trace the origins of the the Ahomiya movement from colonial times till India's freedom. The Assamese assimilated their erstwhile rulers, the Ahoms, a tribe of Burma. But their travails began with the advent of the British and their arbitrary redrawing of provincial boundaries which inevitably left Assam with 'strange bed-fellows' and a margin of 'slightest of numbers', demographically.
The history of Assam is unique dating back to the Ahom invasion of the thirteenth century. Assam owes its present name to the Ahoms who called their province Aham or Asam. The Ahoms belonged to the Shan tribe (a tribe of Burma) from the ancient kingdom of Mungmau or Pong located in the upper portion of Irrawady valley.⁵

A distinctive feature of the Ahom rule in Assam was the absorption of the conquerors by the conquered. The Ahoms were absorbed by the Assamese-speaking Hindus, inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley. The Ahoms emerged victors in numerous wars and brought under their fold the hill tribes such as the Nagas, the Mikirs, the Kacharis, Khasis and Jaintias, besides the initial base of the Brahmaputra valley and also overthrew the Koch kings, the powerful kings of north-eastern Bengal. They also succeeded in sending back the Mohammedans, who however held for a considerable time the erstwhile two lower districts of Goalpara and Kamarupa. In fact the Ahoms efforts in keeping the mighty Mughals at bay— at a time when Muslim influence was at its zenith elsewhere in India helped increase their prestige manifold.⁶

The Treaty of Yandabo: The Advent of the British

The British descended upon the scene of the north-east India as early as 1761 marked by the assault on Tripura, but it was more

than six decades before the Britishers could set foot in Assam. This was facilitated with the dislodging of the Burmese invaders and the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo. The treaty of Yandabo (signed in 1826) can be treated as a milestone in the sense it paved the way of Assam into the British orbit of influence, thus heralding the beginning of the links of Assam with India. But it was as late as 1870s that some of the hill areas of Assam could be finally brought under the British umbrella. The status of Assam, however, remained that of a peripheral region under the overall control of the Bengal Presidency until early-1873. It was only in 1874 that the whole of erstwhile Assam was separated from Bengal and declared a Scheduled district. But even in the newly constituted province of Assam, "it was forced into an involuntary partnership with the populous Bengal district of Sylhet. Imperialism, thus encouraged ethnicity to play a divisive role and hinder the growth of nationalism".\(^7\) Subsequently it assumed the status of Chief Commissionership in 1912 and in 1921 it took the shape of a Governor's province. But despite the different forms Assam assumed, it was "left (more) an appendage rather than an integral part of British India".\(^8\)

**Partition of Bengal: Agony of Assam ?**

The genesis of the Assam problem can be traced to the colonial policy of organisation of provinces. An outcome of this policy

\(^7\)Guha, A: *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1977) p.335.

\(^8\)Chaube, S.K. & Munshi, Sunil & Guha, A: "Regional Development & the National Question in North-East India" *Social Scientist*, Vol.4, No.1, August 1975, p.45.
was clubbing-up of people belonging to different linguistic groups into one entity as witnessed in the case of Assam, or the splitting of people belonging to a particular linguistic group into many entities as evident with Bengalis and Telugus. In fact the agony of Assam can be said to have begun in 1905 with the partitioning of the Bengal Presidency into a predominantly Bengali Muslim province in the east consisting of Assam and a predominantly Bengali Hindu province in the west. Obviously the linguistic question was used in an opportunistic manner in the case of the partition of Bengal.

However the reorganisation of Bengal was opposed tooth and nail by both the Bengali Hindus as well as Assamese. The Bengalis saw through the aim of the Curzon Plan to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule. To the Bengali Hindus it was a deliberate attack on the Bengali nation united by a common history, language and race. They considered it a national calamity in the sense that a fence has been drawn between the Hindus and the Muslims in order to interfere with the solidarity of the Bengali-speaking population and thus weaken their political influence. Moreover they had reservations about being clubbed to what they called a backward region. On the other hand the partition (of Bengal) did not satisfy the Assamese too, who resented their being clubbed into a portion of Bengal as it intensified their fears of getting absorbed into the (advanced) Bengali community. The dust raised in the aftermath of the

9See Guha, A, op.cit., p. 71.
partition led to its annulment in 1911 leading to a reunification of west and East Bengal and the establishment of Assam as a separate chief commissioner's province. Assam was no doubt established but with a reduced homogeneity (as always) as it consisted of Sylhet, a predominantly Bengali Muslim district and Cachar, a predominantly Bengali Hindu district. Thus the new set-up of Assam—consisting of the two valleys, the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills, Naga hills, Mizo hills and Sylhet district—continued till the partition of India and of Assam in 1947.

Sylhet: Damocles' Sword?

The inclusion of the Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet in the Assam composition of 1911 proved to be a damocles' sword hung over its head, as Assam was demographically and politically balanced precariously between the Assamese Hindus and the Bengali Muslims. The flood of migration into Assam begun with the Bengal partition in 1905 almost inundated the province in the late-thirties, under the special patronage of the then Chief Minister of Assam, Saadullah of the Muslim League. He encouraged migration on a mass scale on grounds of boosting 'Grow More Food' campaign since the idea squarely fitted into the Muslim League's scheme of creating a Pakistan on the eastern flank on the basis of their numerical strength. The plan received whole-hearted support from the colonial rulers—the British—as well, as it suited their notoriously famous weapon of divide-and-rule. From the statistics available it is obvious that the efforts of the Muslim League and the British did pay-off as between 1901 and
1951 Assam's population increased by nearly thirty five per cent per decade as against its own population growth of twenty per cent per decade, understandably much higher than all the states except West Bengal and Tripura which faced the same flood of migration.¹⁰

Phase-II: 1947-1985
Partition of the Subcontinent:

This phase is an account of the events in the post-Independent era. Assam went through innumerable redrawing of its boundaries after freedom, which carved and granted autonomy to various hill areas so that what is left can be a State of their own. But even more a serious problem was the unhindered immigration of Bangladeshis, and the attendant linguistic conflict culminating in a long-drawn agitation against the influx almost shaking the foundation of the Indian polity. It is precisely the reasons of the agitation that the present phase attempts to analyze. The period covered is till 1985, when hopes of some sort of normalcy were revived with the signing of the Assam Accord.

With the partition round the corner there were serious apprehensions regarding Assam's future in the new set-up. However the Cabinet Mission's plan to carve out a predominantly Muslim zone in eastern India consisting of Assam was rejected outright by the Congress Party ministry holding the reins of power. But

though Assam managed to remain with India after the partition, its Sylhet district, popular as the 'rice-bowl' was chopped-off and clubbed to the newly-created Pakistan on the basis of the referendum held there.\textsuperscript{11}

Official Passage for Immigrants?

But despite the carving of Pakistan the exodus into the north-east India remained undeterred. In fact after Independence the mass influx received 'official attestation', so to say, with the passage of Influx from Pakistan (Control) Act, 1949, the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 and the Nehru-Liaquat Act, 1950. The Pacts were prepared with the actual intention of allowing only genuine cases of immigrants- persons displaced by communal disturbances to return back to Assam, but instead turned into a (official) gateway to mass illegal immigration,\textsuperscript{1} as it became difficult to identify and detect the genuine from the illegal ones.

However the separation of Sylhet from Assam proved to be a double-damocles' sword (or twin-danger) as it resulted in the separation of the economically-rich rice-bowl of Assam, Sylhet from it and at the same time left the problem of swarming Muslims into Assam intact. In other words it faced disadvantages on two grounds: 1) the rich Sylhet was separated and 2) there appeared

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{See Kumar, D.P, op.cit., p.43. Also Nari, Rustomji: Imperilled Frontiers (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983) p.9.}

to be no respite from the exodus. Sylhet's economic attributes and the deep economic dent left on Assam due to its separation are aptly captured by an observation in the 1951 Census:

"Though Assam's loss in area as a result of this partition is negligible (it has lost only 1/8th of its existing area), it has lost very nearly 1/3rd of its entire population along with its vast paddy fields, and the tea, lime and cement Industrie" of Sylhet. Far reaching effects of the loss will continue to be felt by Assam and India for many years to come".\(^\text{13}\)

But Sylhet or no Sylhet, the scene remained the same as hordes and hordes of Muslims continued to plough their way into it (and also West Bengal, Tripura and other north-eastern states of India) in search of better economic opportunities, having no qualms whatsoever leaving miles behind their dream homeland Pakistan - created on the basis of their religion, Islam. Perhaps the high density of population (in terms of man-land ratio) in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, coupled with high rates of unemployment, poverty and illiteracy triggered the exodus. The other probable reasons for the exodus were "availability of land, proximity to ancestral homes, absence of any restriction on the mobility of population, demand for labour force from the tea industry, coal mines, construction of railroads and government buildings which the local people could not provide and

improvement of communications”. In order to have a good understanding of the Assam tangle it is therefore imperative that we focus on, the immigration aspect and the attendant linguistic turn of the problem.

Immigration into Assam: The linguistic problem

Significantly Assam has the unique honour of having an abnormally high rate of population increase among the Indian states, the outcome of unprecedented immigration, which reached the second highest in the world during 1901-1951. This was exceeded only by Brazil. But when exactly did its problem arise? Or what precisely, gravitated the two communities-Assamese and Bengali- into sharper relief?

Apparently the identity crisis of Assam is a British legacy as the problem arose from the colonial times when the British packed the services in Assam with Bengalis due to lack of qualified Assamese. However the expansion of educational facilities witnessed a spurt in qualified Assamese for entry into government and other services but found their employment avenues already filled. Another problem encountered by the Assamese was the imposition of Bengali on them in 1837, which continued formally till 1882 and practically upto 1921. The woes of Assam can therefore be said to have begun with the establishment of Company

15Dass, op.cit., p.850.
rule over Assam following the Treaty of Yandabo. As one of the observers aptly remarked: 'The establishment of the company's authority, consequent necessity of manning the different government departments and the constitution of Assam bringing-in large Bengali-speaking areas, may be said to have marked the beginning of the language problem'. The identity crisis may be traced perhaps to this lack of educated and skilled personnel. The backwardness of Assam, in fact is also reflected in its general dependence on primeval agriculture with a low productive turn-out, highly vulnerable to frequent floods geographically isolated with rather poor transport and communication facilities. Apparently a combination of these factors coupled with the influx of foreign nationals led to the Assam crisis.

Since Independence, it has been found that Assam has had language agitations in practically every decade—one in the early-fifties, another at the outset of the sixties, the third with the dawn of the seventies and the fourth, a far-more serious one in 1979 when the movement assumed frightening dimensions in the form of the anti-foreigners' agitation and several skirmishes at regular intervals. Such a scenario naturally gives rise to questions about the antecedents of Assamese nationalism.

Assamese nationalism is not a new phenomenon which developed/overnight with the influx of Bengalis. Rather (generally) considered a post-British phenomenon, Assamese nationalism in fact has been a product of the anti-British struggle. No wonder some of the early martyrs of the freedom struggle have been obviously from Assam. The provincial Assamese leaders have interestingly maintained close links with the Indian National Congress ever since its inception. The elite linkages so to say are evident as practically every session of the Indian National Congress has had attendance from Assam. In fact Assam even had the unique honour of hoisting the Congress tri-colour in 1942, for the first time in the nation's history at a Government building at Gohpur.20 Yet despite its apparently deep involvement and commitment to the values of national unity and consciousness, one was a witness in Assam to a movement aimed at liberating the state from colonial yoke of India. It puzzles one even more as to its timing: why did Assam choose to stage the volte-face after well over three decades of Independence. However the leaders of the Assam movement have declared that their movement and resentment is not against outsiders per se (i.e. non-Assamese), but against foreigners (i.e., persons who are not statutory Indian citizens). Thus the "roots of discontent apparently Lay in fears of cultural annihilation".21 It is difficult to understand what made the until-then patriotic Assamese question the

Fight Over Numerical Strength: Assamese versus Bengalis

Significantly Assam has been marked by a very strange demographic fluctuation. As per the figures of the 1901 census a mere twenty two per cent declared their mother tongue as Assamese against a high forty eight per cent of Bengalis. But over the years the meagre figure of twenty two per cent (of Assamese) increased to just 31.4 per cent in 1931 but had a quantum jump to 56.7 per cent in 1951 to 57.14 in 1961 and 60.89 in 1971. Thus in the Assamese camp the population figures leaped-up, but it was on the inverse in the Bengali and other linguistic groups. Bengalis recorded 16.5 per cent in 1951 as against 26.8 in 1931. Assam has thus emerged in the process as a highly linguistic and ethnically diversified state.

The dramatic increase in the Assamese-speaking population from a minority group of 31.4 per cent in 1931 to 56.7 per cent in just two decades has baffled many. The States Reorganisation Commission after its Assam visit in 1955 went so far as to note: "upto 1931, when linguistic tabulation was last undertaken, Assamese was not in fact a language spoken by a majority of the inhabitants of the state.,,..".²²

The sharp percentage variation induced the Superintendent of Census operations of Assam, 1951 Mr. R.B.Vaghaiwalla to comment: "There is a striking increase in the percentage of people who speak Assamese...With the solitary exception of Assamese every single language or language group shows a decline in the percentage...All this decline has gone to swell the percentage of people speaking Assamese in 1951. The figures do not fail to reflect the aggressive linguistic nationalism now prevailing in Assam, coupled with the desire of many persons among them to declare Assamese as their mother tongue in the state of their adoption." He goes to remark by way of clarification that: "it is not unlikely that some amongst the persons who have returned their mother tongue as Assamese have done so for devious motives, even though their Knowledge of Assamese may not amount to much".23

The bandwagon of Assamese-speaking population figures registered an increase, continually decade after decade, popping-up from 56.7 per cent in 1951 to 57.14 in 1961 and 60.89 in 1971. Various theories have been attributed to the demographic transformation of Assam. S.K.Das spells out three causes for the population increase: 1) high immigration, 2) natural rate increase since 1921 and 3) the relative absence of mobility (among the natives).24

23Ibid.
The first theory of population increase, heavy immigration, has been the most popular one cited by most of the observers of the Assam problem. For instance Sarin belonging to this school of thought comments: "There is no earthly reason to view the abnormal growth rate of population in Assam as due to natural factors. Such abnormal growth rate could be attributed to unabated influx from erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, and immigration from other parts of the country." To substantiate his comments he holds: "The population of Assam (present boundaries) in 1901 was 3.3 million. Had Assam's population increased at the same rate as the rest of India from 1901 to 1971 (130 per cent) her population could now be 7.6 million rather than 15 million, a difference of 7.4 million".25

In the face of arguments for heavy immigration, the theory of high natural rate increase since 1921, has taken a back-seat. But Das, a strong proponent of this theory, in an opposite vein to Sarin's opines that pressing the panic-button on the basis of simple arithmetical differences between Assam's decennial population growth rates for 1951-61 and 1961-71 and those of India would be factually inconsistent. He shows that between 1951-61 there was also an equally big hike in the rates of India's population from 13.31 per cent to 21.64 per cent. The rate of growth in 1951-61 was 75.33 per cent higher than that in 1941-51 for Assam and 62.58 per cent higher for India- the relative position remaining more or less unchanged. Das

25 Sarin, op.cit.
attributes the high natural rates to the launching of family planning since 1951. But when compared to the mean national performance and that of other states, Assam does lag behind in its performance of family planning and therefore its high natural growth. By way of defence, he remarks: "if immigration being equally responsible with positive natural growth rate, has caused Assam's population to grow at the highest rate in India between 1901-51, it also demonstrates an equally unique example of the magnitude an original language of a region can grow by adopting most of those immigrants into it".

In the beginning "all that the immigrants wanted was land. But an open clash of interests began to take place when they surged forward in all directions from their riverine base in search of more space in the-areas-held by the-autochtons". During the initial phases of immigration the generally poor landless peasants from erstwhile East Bengal assimilated themselves with the Assamese as they did not have the numerical as well as cultural viability to resist the process (of assimilation). But over course of time the concentration of the same group in a particular region, sharing the same language and in many cases, a same religion, along with similar economic pattern of existence tended to give a distinct sense of identity to the peasants, thus putting a halt to further assimilation and the movement gradually

26 Ibid. , pp.851-857.
27 Ibid. , p.857.
bhadralok which had come to dominate the administration during the early years of British rule. Out of this conflict having strong economic roots emerged a stronger middle class constituting of high caste Hindu strata of Assamese and as well as ethnic and tribal people. In the process of their struggle for restoration of a rightful place for the Assamese language and the preservation of a rural-based culture, the Assamese have attained a good degree of identity and leadership. The resurgence of Assamese nationalism, a fallout of the movement has perhaps also provided an opportunity to the weak regional bourgeoisie to go one up in the competition it faces from the national bourgeoisie as it would obviously gain even from a slight loosening of the stranglehold of the national bourgeoisie over the State's natural resources.\textsuperscript{33}

The inundation left many aspects of Assam—a conglomeration of three groups of native peoples: the Assamese-speaking Hindu population residing mainly in the Brahmaputra valley; the hill tribes—the Garo, Khasi, Naga, Mikir and Mizo-speaking diverse languages and of Mongoloid stock, and the indigenous plains-tribals believed to predate the Assamese Indo-Aryans, popularly known as Bodos or Kacharis—at peril. The demographic invasion affected many aspects of Assam, its population patterns, its economy, its politics, its cultural and linguistic personality, thus putting at stake the very basis of the identity of the Assamese.

\textsuperscript{33}Misra, op.cit., p.65.
The Assam Movement: its issues

Little wonder the Assam movement harbouring round the fears of wealth and power was a mass movement of all Assamese directed towards the infiltration of outsiders, particularly the Bengalis into the land of the Assamese. The three propositions on which the hate-Bengali campaign became a hit were:

1) the strong repugnance of the Bengalis who were regarded as cultural Imperialists out to assimilate the Assamese.

2) to the Assamese their nascent nationality was no match when pitted against the superior Bengali nationality—superior and powerful in all aspects of education, language, literacy and cultural traditions. Ironically it was colonial subjugation of Assamiya language by the imposition of Bengali, which paved the ground in which Assamiya pre-national ethos could be fermented and consolidated into Assamiya nationality. As Guha opined: "as an ideology and movement, Assamese nationalism took, shape only....when such questions as the preservation and promotion of the mother tongue, jobs for the sons-of-the-soil and concern over colonial constraints on development began to stir Assam." Thus the British policy of linguistic hegemony and ethnic isolation acted as stepping-stones for the development of Assamiya nationality.

3) the third theme in the Bengali versus Assamese relations is the strong belief that Bengali cultural imperialism can be combated only by linguistic nationalism. The Assamese strongly resented the efforts of Bengalis to treat them as culturally inferior provincial cousins. Thus it was strategised that unless we assimilate a major chunk of this
Thus the main three propositions which perhaps helped the movement snowball into a burning cauldron were: alleged intrusion of foreigners, mainly from Bangladesh; to prevent Bengali domination and also to prevent national and outsiders' exploitation of Assam.\textsuperscript{35}

However the movement initially launched against the infiltration of all non-Assamese, gradually donned the anti-foreigner garb around 1979 when Bangladeshis or Bengali Muslims became special targets of attack. Such a turn came in September 1979 with the detection of about 45,000 names of foreigners in the electoral list of nearly 7,00,000 voters during the bye-election to the Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency. The detection of such a huge number of foreigners in the electoral rolls probably made the Assamese panicky thus transforming the movement into a communal one, with their ire reserved specially for the Bengali Muslims. The fanaticism was in fact so strong that the popular demands of the movement like the establishment of an University at Guwahati, a bridge over the Brahmaputra and an oil refinery at Guwahati were sidelined and the issue of foreign nationals assumed high importance as a political weapon in the hands of whom, Rafiabadi called "the upper-caste Hindus".\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34}Sarin, op.cit., p.95.
\textsuperscript{35}Gupta, J.D., op.cit,, p. 159.
\textsuperscript{36}See his Assam; From Agitation to Accord (New Delhi: Genuine Publications 1979) p.99.
Prior to the nasty-turn of 1979, the spectre of linguism haunting Assam took a purely linguistic form. In the seventies and earlier in the sixties too, the All Assam Students Union had launched movements on the issue of making Assamese the sole official language instead of the prevailing two languages, Assamese and Bengali, and succeeded in making the government accept their demands.

To trace the movement to purely to a contestation over the numbers between the Bengalis and the Assamese may render the study incomplete. It will be in fitness of things therefore, to analyse the effect that the influx has had on its economy and the vice-versa. It is also necessary to examine Assam's relation with the Centre.

Assam: its economy

It has been unfortunate that the Assam—the fulcrum of the entire strategic north-east has remained underdeveloped within an underdeveloped economy. In 1981-82, it has been shown that Assam's per capita annual average income of 110 US dollars is rather meagre compared to all major states except six. This poor income is despite the rich resource base of the state which naturally led to allegations of being treated as a colonial hinterland.\(^\text{37}\) The Centre, it has been alleged has extracted too much of surplus from the resource rich (in oil, plywood, tea)

state but had given back too little in the form of revenues and grants.\textsuperscript{38}

The injustice, typically meted out by the Centre has been pointed out in three cases:

1) Being the largest producer of crude oil - about sixty per cent of India's crude oil production - it gains less than three per cent of its value in the form of royalties. But what is worse has been the fact that one refinery located outside the state earns three times this royalty and even allowed a refining capacity double to that permitted to Assam.

2) Secondly although Assam is a boss of the tea industry, producing about fifty-five per cent of the country's production, tragically its crowning achievement gets diluted in the face of the fact that the tea-estate owners and as a consequence the dividends from the tea sales are mainly controlled and appropriated by 'Bahiragatas' or outsiders, that is non-Assamese.

3) Even in the case of plywood the alleged injustice to Assam has been glaring. Assam retains the top-position, supplying about sixty per cent of India's plywood, but as far as returns are concerned it is able to retain a tiny portion with a mammoth part swallowed by the Centre in the form of taxes.\textsuperscript{39}

So Assam the largest producer of oil, tea and plywood has remained so in name only, in the sense, the presence of these

\textsuperscript{38}Phadnis, \textit{op.cit.}, p.96.
\textsuperscript{39}Gupta, J.D, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.157-158.
commodities in huge quantities in the state has not substantially benefited the State financially. Its rich-resource-base has not been able to boost its barren financial position as the budgetary position of Assam has consistently projected net deficits in revenue.\textsuperscript{40} Even the British pattern of industrialisation was more on the basis of non-replenishable resources and Assam serving simply as a production base for tea, coal, oil and plywood but related major economic activities were located in Calcutta. However "the present pauperisation of Assam" is attributed by some economists "to the Constitutional provision of Article 270 excluding Corporation Tax from being treated as Income Tax, thus depriving it of an important and elastic source of income-taxes from the trade in tea and oil". Assam thus loses on two grounds: 1) additional grant from the increased resources of the divisible pool and 2) locating headquarters of tea and oil in Assam (from West Bengal).\textsuperscript{41}

**Development overshadowed by colonial interests?**

But the lop-sided development of Assam is not something which has cropped overnight. It has rather been a continuing policy right from the times of colonial rule. The initial investment in tea plantation, timber, plywood and oil during the British time was thought to herald a rapid pace of development and the beginning of a new era in Assam's economics. But alas, the

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid.

optimism was short-lived, as the British investment in fact induced lop-sided development. To quote Guha: "The big push in the government and British sectors failed to induce a commensurate growth of the indigenous private sector. What was developing with an amazing tempo was the British-owned and British-managed part of the economy, with labour and middlemen services almost recruited from the Indian provinces."\textsuperscript{42}

**Raw-material based economy:**

Assam possessing a raw-material based economy lacks investment—both private and public—in the twin-sectors of agriculture and industry. Justifiably the private investor's have been apprehensive of investments in Assam as well as other units of the north-east because of its strategic location as a frontier state like Punjab, and the security risk involved as was experienced in the 1962 Indo-China war. This prevents the rise of the bourgeoisie. Added to it the public investment has been too low compared to the national averages. This dismal investment naturally necessitated importing all items from outside the state, including small items like safety pins and naphthalene balls. The extent of the finances getting drained out of the state became quite evident as per a survey carried out (1976) in

which at least twenty eight imported items could be locally manufactured that too without much market constraint.\textsuperscript{43}

Thus the fate of Assam- producer of almost sixty per cent of the nation's tea and nearly half of the indigenous petroleum and endowed with a high percentage of hydrocarbon resources, uranium, forests and the mighty Brahmaputra remains in economic doldrums. In agriculture, Assam has put-up a poor performance.\textsuperscript{44} The wonder of what popularly came to be known as the green-revolution has not touched even the fringes of the agricultural sector here-though it remains its chief economy with 76.7 per cent of the working force engaged in it. The agricultural production in Assam grew by merely forty per cent between 1950-51 and 1968-69 as against sixty six per cent of the whole country.\textsuperscript{45} "The package of irrigation, fertilisers and high-yielding seeds responsible for the boon of green revolution, remains elusive and a distant dream in the capital-deficit Assam.\textsuperscript{46}

The incubus of underdevelopment has not spared even the most prestigious sector, its crowning achievement-the tea plantations in Assam-as it has been marked by stunted growth or stagnation. No doubt, the most profitable tea gardens are retained by monopoly houses but a mass of the gardens have been victims of

\textsuperscript{43}Sharma, M. L, ibid.
\textsuperscript{44}Kumar, D.P, \textit{op.cit.}, p.319.
\textsuperscript{45}The statistics (of Assam) of only the period when the Green Revolution created marvels in the agrarian sector in other parts of the country has been cited.
\textsuperscript{46}Chaube, \textit{et al.}, p.48.
speculative exchange of ownership. To cap it all, since the Indian tea including Assam has been suffering from the crisis of capitalist over-production, it may naturally lead to its logical corollary: dissolution of many tea gardens and thus spell doom for many of the labourers. Rapid strides of industrialisation could provide the answer and remedied much of the malady of retrenchment of the labourers with their absorption.\textsuperscript{47} But industrially too, Assam has lacked a strong base considering the fact that there is no metal-based industry worth the name in the whole region, that is including the whole of the north-east. There seems to be no effort forthcoming in the exploitation of mineral resources, other than oil.\textsuperscript{48}

Although "there was a vast possibility of agro and forest based industries in the dense, thick forested regions of Assam, the main immediate hurdle seems to be the existing communication facilities built purely for administrative and security purposes".\textsuperscript{49} Needless to add, history and topography have certainly acted as bottlenecks in the developmental process as it has been noticed, constraints imposed on communication and consequently on flow of innovative practices was also responsible for traditional agricultural economy maintaining the same old form. But this does not exonerate the centre—both British and now

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., p.49
\textsuperscript{48}Iiid., p.48.
\textsuperscript{49}Ibid.
Indian- as no conscientious effort seems to have been made to remove these constraints.50

Evidently economics alone could not have ignited the ethnic turmoil in Assam. It can rather be regarded as one of the critical factors which succeeded in bringing the Assamese-people belonging to the same racial stock-under a single banner. Thus the poor agricultural and industrial base combined with the domination of the bahiragatas (on linguistic basis) in the state's economy may be said to have led to the eruption of the Assam movement. The mass outburst revolved round a long list of neglect, suppression and exploitation. "What Assam is facing today may be looked as the upsurge of the oppressed nationality trying to assert itself".51

Thus in Assam the problem of "regional planning turns politically charged as ethnicity and economics are ill-adjusted within its framework".52 Alayev has maintained that "the economic backwardness of individual areas is a result in a number of cases of the disregard for the interests of some or other ethnic group, and this constitutes an objective condition for setting in motion the forces of disintegration".53 In Assam we face the peculiar

50 It is perhaps the reason why Assam feels like a Cinderella of the provinces- the title of this chapter. Cinderella, the fiction character who underwent agony and suffering in the hands of her step-mother.

51 For a detailed study see Misra, U, op.cit., p.66.

52 Chaube, et al, p.43.

53 Extracted from Enrid, Alayev: "Regional Planning" Social Sciences, 4, 6, 12, 1974, p.161 in Ibid., p.43.
position in which migrants and local people compete for the same jobs resulting in a situation of gains for the migrants then losses for the natives. Weiner throwing more light on the migrants versus natives held "the larger the benefits accruing from migration for the local population, the more likely it is that the local people will not press hard for restrictions on migration and will make some competitive response; the smaller the gains and conversely, the greater the losses, the more likely it is that the local population will seek restrictions, on the free entry of migrants, demand protectionism in the labour market, and press for reservations on the land".\textsuperscript{54} It is precisely the latter position that we have been witnessing in Assam.

Phase-Ill: Post-Assam Accord agitation:

In order to put a halt to the agitation in Assam the historic Accord was signed between the All Assam Students Union and Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister on the 15th of August, 1985. This, in turn, led to the birth of two regional political parties: Assam Gana Parishad and the United Minorities Front, both of which participated in the elections subsequently held in Assam.\textsuperscript{55} The silver lining of the accord has been the forging of pan-Assamese ethnic unity and consolidation, as the whole lot of the ethnic Assamese of the Brahmaputra valley stood behind the Assam Gana Parishad in the December polls of 1985 held in the


\textsuperscript{55} Niru, op.cit., p.216.
However the accord is believed to have satisfied only the upper-caste Hindus as it failed to address the middle class problems and has created more problems than it has solved. Although the Accord has spoken of Constitutional, Legislative and administrative safeguards for the Assamese, it has not specified the special steps to be taken in this regard. The accord has helped in the eruption of separatist urges among the tribals like the Bodos who have started demanding their own separate homeland. For the Bengalis their linguistic freedom appeared to be at stake, while for the Muslims the fear of religious as well as cultural suppression has gained active currency. In addition the accord has been alleged to have overlooked the interests of other ethnic identities and their problems. The present-Assam has been truncated even earlier with the separation of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. And the remaining ethnic groups, the tribals of the plains and hills of Assam, as also the ethnic Bengali-speaking have renewed their demands of homelands in the form of Udayachal and Purbachal and the more aggressive demand of the Bodos, Bodoland. In the post-accord scenario these demands have been revived with renewed vigour as the belief has gained ground that their destiny lies outside Assam. The six-year old agitation and subsequently several years of the Assam Gana Parishad's rule has put into focus- the differences and separateness of the varied

56 Kumar, D.P, op.cat., p.324.
57 Rafiabadi, op.cit., p.100.
58 Kumar, op.cit., p.325.
communities that make up the mosaic of the Assam society.\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{Sub-Regional demands:}

The demand of the Bodos for a Homeland: Bodoland

Assam has a large tribal population—about 10 per cent of the total population or some 2.2 million are tribals. The Bodos are the most numerous of the plains tribes and constitute about 40 per cent of the tribals.\textsuperscript{61} In fact 49 per cent of Assam's population constituted Bodos in 1947 but it dropped sharply to 29 per cent by 1971 due to internal and external migrations and the various reorganisations that the state has undergone.\textsuperscript{61} The Bodos were the rulers of the entire plains of Assam, North-Bengal, parts of present Bangladesh and Tripura preceding the rule of the Ahoms. Incidentally their rule continued in some parts till the annexation of Assam in 1873 by the British. The Bodos are believed to have sought a separate entity even during the British regime.

The Bodos formed a political party, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) in 1967 to fight for a separate province for them. The prime objective of the PTCA was to demand a Union territory for the Bodos and other Plains tribals called Udayachal in order to protect their ethnic identity, language and culture. Another organisation, the All Bodo Students Union was formed, modeled on

\textsuperscript{59}Ibid., p.326.

\textsuperscript{60}Ibid, p. 327.

the same lines, with the same purpose. The Bodos demand for a homeland covers an area of 25,478 sq.kms out of Assam's total area of 78,543 sq.kms. The new state is proposed to be agrarian-based with ninety per cent of the population dependent on agriculture. Their main demand relates to the autonomous preservation and upliftment of their severely economically backward area and identity. The benefits of the Sixth and Seventh Schedules covering all other tribes in the post-independence period, tragically fall short of the Bodos.

The catalyst to the Bodo agitation was provided with the imposition of the Assamese language. Rustomji aptly remarked, that "it is anomalous that the Assamese failed to anticipate the reactions of the tribal people to the imposition of Assamese when they themselves were so sensitive to the issue of language. He further remarked that "Assamese chauvinism, ironically enough, that diminished Assam and lost her tribal population". The list of demands of the Bodos include besides a separate state, greater job reservations, inclusion of the Bodo language in the Eighth Schedule and creation of District Councils in the Bodo-dominated areas on the south banks of the Brahmaputra. The Bodos began their agitation in March 1987 in support of the above demands which continued for six years.

However the Centre as well as the State Government have turned down the demand on grounds of geographical and demographical

62 Rustomji, op.cit., p.37.
63 Das, N.K, op.cit., p.246.
considerations, incidentally, the Bodos do not constitute a numerical majority even in a single district so as to qualify for a separate statehood. The Bhupinder Singh Committee constituted to look into the Bodo question suggested just the formation of a three-tier politico-administrative structure in order to satisfy the requirements for the maintenance of the distinct Bodo cultural identity.

The Bodoland Autonomous Council Bill, 1993 seeking to provide the establishment of an administrative authority in the name of the Bodoland Autonomous Council was introduced on April 12, 1993 in the Assam Assembly. A Bodoland Autonomous Council in Assam with maximum autonomy within the framework of the Constitution comprising contiguous geographical areas between the rivers Sankosh and Mazbet, the river Panchoi for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement of the Bodos residing there is sought to be established. It is to have jurisdiction over 2000 villages.

Although the pact met only some of their demands it helped allay their fears and brought about some peace in the valley. At least two more areas, which still remain in Assam—Cachar and the Plains tribals, areas north of the Brahmaputra river where the Bengalis and the plains tribals resent the imposition of Assamese language and dominance. They have demanded for Union territories, Purvanchal for Cachar-Karimganj and the other for the Plains
tribals to be called Udayachal or even Bodoland. Meanwhile another organisation well known as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was born towards the fag end of the Assam agitation.

United Liberation Front of Assam

The foundation of ULFA was laid on the April 7, 1979 incidentally the Assamese new year, at Sibsagar, Assam. The venue was the historic Ranghar (entertainment house) built by the Ahoms rulers. So chronologically the ULFA had its origins in the waning phase of the Assam movement. The most logical and viable alternative before the ULFA appeared to be an armed struggle. The wide-spread fear among the Assamese of becoming a minority in their own state led to the emergence of separatist organisations like the Lachit Sena in the sixties and ULFA in the seventies.

The primary goal of ULFA is the attainment of a Swadhin Asom, meaning independent Assam. It received tremendous support from the Assamese people due to the growing sense of alienation from the Centre, a direct corollary of the mass influx of migrants into Assam threatening the very socio-cultural and demographic structure of Assam.

The root of the problem resulting in insurgency in a way is the sense of helplessness and alienation perceived by the people not only in the matter of control over the natural resources of the region but over the question of pattern of development as well.

\[64\] Kumar, op cat. , pp.6-7.
The sense of apprehension is perceivable even in the issue of maintaining the old demographic balance and also for that matter on the issue of preserving the substance of their traditional culture from contamination of unwanted outside influence, as a result of which their views and sentiments are increasingly being marginalised.

The main theme that ULFA appears to harp on is the conflict between the natives versus migrants or popularly to quote Prafullah Mahanta "the tussle between the citizens and foreigners". The ULFA apparently believes in fighting what it calls the continuing colonialism. They hold that since Independence there has been a change of exploiters and not in the form of exploitation.

Conclusion:

In the final analysis the Assamese history begun with the absorption of their erstwhile rulers, the Ahoms, became the vice-versa in the colonial and post-colonial periods. They almost got absorbed into the vast Bengali immigrant community, an outcome of being clubbed to disparate communities or what has been termed as 'strange bed-fellows' (like the Bengali districts of Cachar and Sylhet) with the Assam, a continuing trend since the colonial times. This in turn led to a related aspect— influx of the Bengalis into Assam. The influx, begun with the 'involuntary partnership' with the Bengali districts and subsequently packing of services in Assam with Bengalis by the
Britishers, had its echo in the post-Independent scenario with the spread of educational institutions in Assam resulting in educated unemployed among the Assamese. It boiled down to a situation where the migrants and the natives began to compete for the same jobs leading to a conflict of the Assamese vis-a-vis the Bengali bhadralok. Little wonder the movement was led by the Assamese middle class. Besides the middle class, the regional bourgeoisie also found in the agitation an opportunity to gain from the competition it has at some point with the national bourgeoisie. Initially the Bengalis got assimilated into the Assamese community but as their numbers grew the process (of assimilation) was resisted leading to the immigrant problem assuming serious dimensions. The Assamese waged a long struggle not only to realise a separate province and increase the homogeneity of their province but also to assert the distinctness of the Assamese language from Bengali.

But to treat the Assam crisis as solely an outcome of the immigration problem would be analysing and judging just half the issue. Rather the problem is a combination of many other factors. In fact it is a combination of the demographic invasion of bahiragatas along with the retarded industrial and agricultural base— a result of the centralising drives. In addition to, is the inaccessibility of their own resources. In sum, it boils down to a fight of the native Assamese to gain control over their own resources. And the fight is directed at two levels—to drive out the immigrants and for more economic development.
The very identity of the Assamese appeared to be at stake with the demographic imbalance affecting its population pattern, its economy, its politics and its linguistic and cultural personality. The movement thus aimed at aspirations and urges at three levels—social, economic and political levels.

The attesting of an agreement between the leaders of the Assam agitation, AASU and the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi in 1985 addressing some of the major issues of the movement was apparently believed to put a halt to the crisis. However the post-Accord situation fractured the Assamese consciousness as sub-regional assertions emerged among the Bodos and other ethnic groups in the form of demands for Bodoland, Udayachal and Purbanchal. Insurgency made its appearance in the form of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) to attain what it called Svadhin Asom, meaning an independent Assam.

The Assamese movement has thus covered a full circle. The movement basically a fallout of seeming discrimination by the Central authorities faced similar allegations by its constituent units. In her zeal to promote unity by prescribing Assamese as the official language for the entire state including the hill districts, ended only in alienating and ultimately paving the way out for the hill districts from its orbit.65

65Rustomji, op.cit., p.152.
Thus in the wake of the Assam movement and its fallout, what is discernible is the percolation of democratisation to lower levels and identities, a continuing trend since the colonial times. The movement launched in response to distortions in the various aspects of Centre versus federal units found a similar expression (a similar pattern exists) subsequently within the unit. The spillover is especially due to the serious imbalances in the social, political and economic spheres. In sum, the Assamese identity which emerged and asserted as a regional identity transmuted into a sub-regional one in the aftermath of Assam Accord as evidenced in the demands of Bodoland, and Purbanchal asserting for cultural autonomy, increase in power and more even distribution of economic benefits.