Social and Political Milieu

The Assam movement like all other significant social movements has its roots in history and society from which it emerged. A social movement cannot emerge from a vacuum all of a sudden. Conditions, conducive for the growth of a popular social movement emerge normally over a relatively long period of time. The Assam movement too, took long time to take a shape of a distinctly visible social movement only in the last part of 1979. However, its earlier stage would remain invisible, if we strictly adhere to 1979 as the beginning point of the Assam movement. In fact, it began much earlier, surfaced visibly in mid 1979.

In our earlier discussion, we have noted that the Asamiya nationality formation process remained not only weak but also incomplete. Even, during the post-colonial period the ruling classes carried on the same distortion in the nationality formation process. The capitalist path of development adopted after independence pushed Assam further into the trap of backwardness. And, largely colonial pattern of exploitation continued vigorously. Simultaneously Assam’s population continued to grow at a faster rate than that of rest of the country.
In such a situation, the Asamiya as a nationality remained apprehensive about the non-Asamiya groups living in Assam. This has been an inseparable part of social transformation of Assam. The Asamiya ruling class too, has been playing a very significant role in propagating, perpetuating and patronising this weakness in their own class interest.

The Rising Expectations

Whatever uneven and distorted development took place in Assam failed to meet the popular expectation of the Asamiya nationality. They have been increasingly feeling that they were not getting their legitimate share of development. Whatever, one can see as symbols of developments during the post-colonial period such as two small public sector refineries or a bridge over the river Brahmaputra near Guwahati, Assam got all these after long struggles launched by all sections of the society in Assam.

The rising expectations of the people generated at the time of collapse of colonial state and attainment of freedom and democracy, gradually started crumbling by the end of sixties. The popular expectation of the Asamiyas did not find satisfaction in post-colonial Assam; instead they felt disappointed.
deceived and alienated. Prior to the beginning of the Assam movement, we have noted in the last chapter that the popular discontentment deepened silently in Assam and it was waiting for an expression. Obviously, such an expression is determined by the waltanschunng of the people. Various political forces competed with one another to provide a waltangschunng to the people as a response to the specific situation and its way-out in Assam. And, this found expression in the political development in Assam particularly from 1971.

Political Response to Rising Expectations:

A. The Congress Party

Both, the Indian and the Asamiya ruling classes realized the popular discontentment and its potential danger to their political leadership. They tried to provide waltangschunng to the people. The Indian National Congress, the mouthpiece of the Indian ruling class realized the depth of the situation to which they led the masses during the post colonial period. And, they changed their political tactics rather than changing their class approach. Therefore, to hide their failure and to ensure their power, the Congress resorted to more and more populist tactics like stopping of privy purses, nationalization of banking and insurance system, besides the slogan of Garibi Hatao at all India level. These
populist political actions paid rich dividends. In addition to these populist actions, depending on the specific situation, the Congress adopted certain actions at the regional/state level to ensure their rule. In Assam, the Congress leadership was dominated by the socially and culturally advanced high caste Asamiyas since the beginning of national movement for independence till the days of Mohendra Mohan Choudhury. However, from 1971 onwards, the Congress party in Assam has been encouraging the members of backward classes to take-up the leadership positions both at the party as well as at the government levels in coalition with scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, Muslims, Bengalis and the black-tribals of Assam's tea-plantation. In the process, as we have shown elsewhere in more details (Hussain 1988: 402-417), the high castes leadership declined and a new coalition within the Congress headed by the backward non-caste leadership emerged in Assam. With this new tactic, the Congress tried to demonstrate that it was deeply interested in uplifting the vast majority of non-caste Asamiyas. This action helped the Congress to improve their support base among the vast majority of backward segments of Assam. However, by this action, the Congress alienated and antagonized the powerful Asamiya middle class which is composed largely of high caste Asamiyas. This also annoyed the weak and small Asamiya bourgeoisie and their mouthpiece, the powerful Asamiya press having same caste and class background.
The Congress under the leadership of S.C. Sinha tried to take-up certain progressive measures like state take-over of whole-sale trade of rice, land-reform etc. But, he failed to get the necessary co-operation from his own bureaucracy. The Asamiya high caste dominated bureaucracy very successfully sabotaged all his sincere efforts. Though, the new tactical line helped the Congress to remain in power, but admittedly, it failed to cross the barriers needed to overcome the economic backwardness of the state. Besides, the Sinha government also failed in the wake of near famine conditions prevailed in many parts of lower Assam and Majuli. As a result many people died out of starvation. The crisis of Assam compounded further under the new group of leadership. The expectation generated by inducing a new leadership from backward groups proved too pejorative; the waltangshunng, the Congress wanted to provide the people too, proved obtuse. The Congress not only faced a crisis in northern India, Bihar and Gujarat; it also faced a crisis in Assam. The emergency of 1975 helped the Congress in Assam on ad-hoc basis to avert the deepening crisis. The Congress managed to run the state government till February 1978. The people of Assam punished the Congress by removing it from the power in 1978 election to the state legislature.
B. Response of Other Rightist Parties: Janata etc.

In March 1977, the Janata party came to power at the Centre, overthrowing the Congress government headed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, riding on a popular response against emergency excesses and authoritarianism. The Janata party gradually emerged as an alternative to the Congress at the state level. The Janata party in Assam included ex-Congressmen particularly of high caste, members of Jana Sangh, Swatantra party and Socialist party. Besides, these national parties, two other regional parties "Peoples' Democratic Party of Assam" (PDPA) led by a communist renegade and "Jani Asam Rajya Parishad" (UARP), also merged with the Janata party. Except, the Socialist Party, all other parties neither had any significant following nor good organization. Therefore, the ex-socialists became the most dominant faction within the Janata. And, another regional party "Plains' Tribal Council of Assam" (PTCA) became its electoral partner.

The Janata party in Assam like at the centre, remained inherently instable because it was a coalition of desperate political elements. The crisis within the ruling classes in India, found manifestation in the crisis of two bourgeois parties—Janata and Congress. The Janata government in Assam collapsed within 20 months i.e. November 1979. Simply speaking, the Janata...
experiment also failed to meet the popular expectation. This shows the limitation of bourgeois alternative to the Congress party both at the centre and the state.

Response of the Left

The Left parties had certain pockets of influence in Assam even in colonial period. Though the left parties were fragmented in Assam, with the gradual decline of Congress at the grass-root level, deterioration of economic conditions, deepening of poverty, worsening of unemployment situation, exploitation of masses and popular urge to a radical alternative, created conditions conducive for the left to popularise its ideology, build-up its organizational network and to present a qualitatively different alternative to the bourgeois parties. Among the left, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) popularly known as CPM succeeded in strengthening its support base in Assam. In 1974, a relatively unknown CPM candidate defeated a well-known Congress stalwart in a bye election to Lok-Sabha. Very significantly, in the first election to Gauhati Municipal Corporation, the CPM emerged as the single largest group. This had shown the CPM's growing popularity in urban Assam. The membership of its mass organisations like Kisan Sabha and C.I.T.U. increased substantially indicating CPM's inroads to the peasantry and the working class. On the other hand,
the Students' Federation of India (SFI) captured the leadership position of many college students' unions and very conspicuously the post-graduate students union of the Gauhati University from 1974 till the beginning of Assam movement in 1979.

The left forces raised the issues related to Assam's economic development, limitations of the capitalist path of development, importance of unity of the oppressed masses irrespective of nationality or religion, importance of struggle against the Congress-Janata but also against the chauvinist and the reactionary forces in the state, more power to the state, more royalty for Assam's crude oil and rapid industrialization of the state. The remarkable growth of left forces in Assam, particularly CPM and its mass organizations alarmed the vested interests at the national, state as well as at the local levels. This became more pronounced after 1978 election to the state legislature.

Election to the State Legislature

A. Decline of Congress
B. Emergence of Janata Party
C. Success of left parties
D. Rejection of Regional parties.
Table 4.01  Number of Seats contested, won and percentage of votes polled in 1978 election to the state legislature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats contested</th>
<th>Seats won</th>
<th>Percentage of votes polled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indian National Congress</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janata Party</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>27.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian National Congress (1)</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of India (CPI)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of India (Marxist)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plains Tribal Council 'of Assam (PTCA)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India Forward Block (AIFB)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India Gorkha League (AIGL)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>13*</td>
<td>25.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>938</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* includes a Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) member.

Table 4.01 shows the position of various political parties in the election to the state legislature. The Congress reduced from 96 in 1972 to only 26 in 1978 election. Significantly, the new Congress led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi won 8 seats. And, both the Congress parties together secured more votes than the Janata party which formed the government with the support of the Plains’ Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and other independents. However, its majority remained precarious.

We would like to emphasize two major developments briefly from 1978 election. First, the left forces emerged as a very significant political force in the legislature with 23 seats in the house of 126 seats. The CPM which had no seat in the earlier house, won 11 seats. More significantly, it contested only 27 seats and polled 5.62 of total votes of the state. Prior to CPM's impressive victory in Assam, left front under the leadership of CPM formed government in Tripura and West Bengal. This enthused the CPM workers and the supporters to work more vigorously in Assam. However, the possibility of entire east going red alarmed the ruling classes and their collaborators. And, they together, irrespective of party affiliations within theiright forces patronized and organized systematic onslaught against the left in general and CPM in particular.
The second important outcome of 1978 election was the total rejection of all the candidates put-up by two regional parties - (1) Asam Jatiyatabadi Dal (AJD) and (2) Purbanchaliya Lok-Parishad (PLP). Though, both the parties failed to win a single seat in the election, they very tacitly helped in the defeat of several candidates of the left parties. Both these two parties tried to whip-up the issue of Bohiragatos, the outsiders in Assam. And, overtly, they had a very strong anti-left orientation in their political outlook and action.

From our brief discussion, it is not very difficult to locate the battle lines and identify the fighters therein during the post 1978 election period. We must note, the failure of two bourgeois parties - Congress and Janata to meet the popular expectation of the Asamiya masses and gradual emergence of the left and particularly CPM as a possible political alternative had drawn severe backlash from the ruling class. They tried to intervene effectively the growth of left forces in Assam; and, in the process, they also did their best to utilize the Assam movement as their cudgel against the left.

Searching an issue for a movement: Bohiragatos, the outsiders

Prior to the election of 1978 to the state legislature, the regional parties and their supporters raised the issue of
Bohiragatos, the outsiders in Assam and their threat to the Asamiya identity. Writings on the walls of towns and educational institutes were flooded with anti-Bohiragato slogans. The Asamiya bourgeois press too, started propaganda against the danger posed by the outsiders in Assam. However, the concept of outsiders remained vague - not precisely defined. The anti-Bohiragato campaign continued vigorously even after the total defeat of the AJD and PLP in 1978 elections.

The vague campaign against the outsiders failed to find adequate popular response. It was gradually realized by the anti-outsider leadership that it just would not be possible for them to get support from the Asamiya masses for a movement against all kinds of outsiders or non-Asamiyas. Besides, the Asamiya masses had become politically more mature to realize the futility of fighting all the outsiders or non-Asamiyas in Assam. They too had seen the anti-Marwari campaign and riots in the late sixties in Guwahati which even did not succeed in driving out a single Marwari from Assam. Rather, it helped the Marwaris of Guwahati to consolidate their position further. After riots and its resultant destruction of properties, the Marwaris built-up much better market, taller and bigger buildings in the heart of Guwahati. The leadership of the anti-Marwari campaign wrested certain concession from the government and the powerful Marwari businessmen to wind-up their
agitation before it took a shape of a movement. The Asamiya masses became conscious of the danger of such opportunist middle class leadership. Therefore, from their own experience, the Asamiya masses did not respond positively to anti-Bohiragato campaign.

The prominent leaders who led the campaign, did not have any respectable image before the public. The most prominent leader of the campaign, an ex-socialist who unsuccessfully contested many elections and did not find a respectable position in the Janata party, because Golap Borbora, another ex-socialist from his district became the President of the state unit of the Janata party who later became the Chief Minister, blocked the former's way to Janata party. Many people sincerely believed that he had become vociferous campaigner against the Bohiragatos only to harass Golap Borbora, the Chief Minister. Another prominent leader had also similar background. He did not get nomination to fight election as a Janata candidate and became a vociferous anti-Bohiragato campaigner. They were assisted by a few ex-student leaders and dropouts from national political parties. They received good coverage and support from the dominant Asamiya press. Though they raised the issue very systematically but, both, the issue and the leadership did not find adequate popular response from the Asamiya masses.
Because of decline of Congress and uncertainties glooming over the Janata party, steady growth of left and particularly of CPM and non-acceptability of leaders of anti-Bohiragato campaign, the Asamiya ruling class had to look for an alternative issue in place of Bohiragato and an alternative political leadership and organization capable of transforming the genuine discontentment of the Asamiya masses to protect and promote the interest of the Asamiya ruling class so as to increase their bargaining power vis-a-vis the Indian ruling class to enable them to exert their hegemony over the people of all nationalities and national minorities like tribals in Assam.

Transformation of Issue: Bohiragato to Vidcshi - (Outsiders to Foreigners)

The issue of foreign national came very handy to the Asamiya ruling class. In a meeting of electoral officers at Ooty, on 24 October 1978, S.L. Shakdhar, the Chief Election Commissioner of India observed:

"I would like to refer to the alarming situation in some states, especially in the North Eastern region, wherefrom reports are coming regarding large-scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls. In one case, the population in 1971 census recorded an increase as high as 34.98% over 1961 census figures and this figure was attributed to the influx of a large number of persons from foreign countries. The influx has become a regular
feature. I think it may not be wrong assessment to make that on the basis of increase of 34.98% between two census, the increase would likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100% over 1961 census. In other words, a stage would be reached when that state may have to recon with the foreign nationals who may be in all probability constitute a sizeable percentage if not the majority of population in the state (Shakdhar quoted in Asam Jagriti 1980: 2-3).

It would be important to recall that Shakdhar did not specify the state of Assam. The leadership of the movement assumed it as a reference to Assam. Even, if we assume it as the case of Assam, one should, however, take it carefully. Shakdhar did neither specify as to who attributed the higher growth was due to the influx of large number of foreign nationals; nor, he claimed that such remark came from his careful study of demography and scrutiny of electoral rolls with the citizenship qualifications. Shakdhar's remark is reminiscences of famous colonial administrator Mullan's remark in 1931 census. Shakdhar described the situation as serious and called for drastic measures. However, two years later, Shakdhar himself from his same official capacity wanted to hold Lok-Sabha election from Assam with the rest of India without properly revising and deleting the names of foreign nationals from the electoral rolls even at the face of massive popular resistence.

It must however, be admitted that Shakdhar's remarks were accepted in letter and spirit by the leadership of the movement.
In addition to Mullan's remarks and Myron Weiner's *Son of the Soil*, Shakdhar's remarks became one of the 3 most sacred certificates to the cause of the movement. Shakdhar's remarks received serious attention of the Assamiya masses and they sincerely felt that continuous immigration from neighbouring countries to Assam and inclusion of their names in the electoral rolls would endanger their distinct identity as nationality and sovereignty of India. The issue of foreign national found touching response from the Assamiya masses when it was specifically linked with the bye-election from Mangoldoi parliamentary constituency. The issue of Bohiragato thus transformed into a more concrete and rational looking issue of Videshi - the foreigners in Assam. The issue caught the imagination of the Assamiya masses.

*Mangoldoi bye election: the beginning of the movement*

The Mangoldoi parliamentary seat had fallen vacant due to death of Hiralal Patwari, the Janata M.P. who died on 28 March 1979. The process of holding bye-election to the Lok Sabha started. At that time, it would be necessary to recollect that, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was out of parliament and she was looking to a safe seat for her to enter the parliament once again. Some of her partymen from Assam wanted her to seek election from the Mangoldoi constituency. They regarded Mangoldoi as a safe seat because in terms of demographic composition, it had shown the decisive position of the
tribals and the minorities together. Mrs. Gandhi because of her secular image and the failure of Janata party to protect their minimum interest, the restive tribals and minorities were expected to vote her en-block. This possibility deeply frightened the Janata leadership in Assam, particularly, its communal faction was determined to stop Mrs. Gandhi's possible victory at any cost, even by tampering the electoral rolls.

As the revision of electoral rolls started, some 70,000 complaints were lodged hurriedly challenging the authenticity of citizenship of same number of persons, most of them already received or exercised their constitutional rights to franchise. Later, it was found that service of the state police force was utilized to inflate the number of alleged foreign nationals in Assam. The inflated number of foreigners frightened both the majority and minority, in Assam. The Asamiya bourgeois press made it a major issue calling bellicosely a large number of Indians as Bangladeshi. We feel, they magnified the Mangoldoi issue which generated very strong fear-psychosis among the large section of the Asamiya middle class and the rural rich. This fear-psychosis gradually engulfed the majority of the Asamiya masses. The press and the leadership, very systematically prepared them to become solid constituency for their movement to emerge to protect their identity.
The way in which number of foreign nationals in Mangoldoi was raised by the Asamiya bourgeois press, it made many non-Asamiyas and neo-Asamiyas extremely apprehensive about the motive of the press and the state government. Names of many Na-Asamiya Muslims and Hindu Bengalis living in Assam for generations were removed from the electoral rolls. Even, names of many Asamiya Muslims including government servants were indiscriminately removed from the electoral rolls. It would be worthwhile to point out that the areas covered by Mangoldoi constituency included those areas which received the earliest Muslim migrants in early 13th century.

It was alleged that an Asamiya DIG of Assam Police who was later dismissed from the service by a Presidential order, was involved in lodging a large number of fabricated complaints by using the state police apparatus with the tacit support from the government. This action eliminated a large number of Muslims and Hindu Bengalis. It would be important to recall that Dinesh Goswami, the leader of the Asam Gana Parishad (AGP) in the Parliament who was in the congress party at that time along-with other Congress leaders submitted a memorandum to the Chief Election Commissioner (See Appendix: B) alleged that the police were used to:

.....deprive a large section of these population of their democratic rights.... So far as our information goes the police officials on instructions from the government procured objection forms in large number.
From election office at Dispur, they could collect only 10,000 forms and as these were not sufficient in their view, another 40,000 were printed. The police officials took these forms to rural areas and got the blank objection forms signed by the village headmen and secretaries of village defence parties in cases under intimidation and threat also. The blank spaces were then filled-up by the police officials themselves..... The citizens of our country are being deprived of their valuable democratic rights by this dubious method of the government......

It should be noted here that the issue of foreign nationals divided the people not only in Mangoldoi but gradually in entire Assam. And, the Asamiya bourgeois press did not even allow any open or democratic discussion in their papers which aimed at only in deepening the fear of the Asamiyas so as to prepare them for a war against the alleged foreigners. This demonstrates the ideological orientation of the Asamiya bourgeois press and their tremendous capacity to mobilize the public opinion among the Asamiyas.

Transformation of Leadership From Regional Parties to AASU

When all bourgeois parties of all India level failed and the regional right-wing parties and their leadership remained largely non-acceptable to the Asamiyas, in such a situation, the obvious choice had fallen on the All Assam Students' Union. The AASU till then did not become a part of any political party like other student organizations. Besides, the AASU had very significantly an 'apolitical' image before a large section of the Asamiya
masses. The press too helped AASU in building-up its apolitical image. Besides, AASU had successfully led a movement for making Asamiya as the only medium of instruction together with English for college education in Assam in 1972. Though, the movement was apparently on the issue of medium of instruction, however, the ruling classes in Assam used the movement to revive the Asamiya-Bengali conflict once again in Assam after 1960. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the AASU proved its capability of leading and mobilizing Asamiya masses on certain sensitive issue in which existing traditional political parties at least would hesitate to take part actively. Therefore, AASU was the most obvious choice for leading the movement against foreign nationals in Assam. Accordingly, AASU took up the issue. AASU gave both gradual general acceptability of the issue and respectability to the movement against the foreign nationals.

By mid-1979, AASU took up the leadership position and prepared the students and the masses for a movement. AASU ascendancy into leadership position abased the divided regional political parties into secondary position. However, a co-ordination body known as All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was formed which included two regional parties, Asam Yubak Samaj headed by a retired bureaucrat, Lawyers Association and Assam Sahitya Sabha. It should also be noted that Asam Sahitya Sabha, a state wide
literary body with organizational network throughout the Brahmaputra valley with an apolitical image gave both strength and respectability to the AAGSP, which it needed seriously. Besides, Assam Sahitya Sabya was an ally of AASU in their 1972 movement on the medium issue.

There were conflicts and competitions between AASU and AAGSP on many occasions, but AASU without any doubt played most dominant role in leading the movement. Though apparently, students were leading the movement, it would be erroneous if we look it as a students movement. Behind the AASU stood solidly the Assamya bourgeoisie, their press and journalists, rural gentry, large section of the middle class including some powerful bureaucrats and high police officials, employees of the state government, contractors, transport operators, owners of Assam's popular mobile theatre groups and a few socialist and communist renegades. Significantly, the Marwaris also financed the movement liberally.

Transformation of AASU

Not only the leadership transformed as noted, AASU too had to transform itself in order to get the dominant leadership position and patronage of the Assamya ruling class. In 1972, AASU successfully led a movement to make Assamya as the only alternative medium of instruction together with English upto graduate level.
AASU's success had drawn many meritorious students with progressive outlook to its fold. They tried to link AASU with the legitimate aspiration of the people of Assam and they expressed their determination in no uncertain terms to fight against the exploitative system. In 1974, when students in Gujarat and Bihar had build-up popular movements against their respective governments, at that time, AASU also tried to build up a mass movement on certain genuine economic demands like implementation of progressive land reform in the interest of the peasantry, more industrialization of Assam under public sector, nationalization of industries owned by big-bourgeoisie without paying any compensation, stoppage of eviction of poor peasants from Doyeng, Kaki, and Mingmon reserved forests, appropriate measure to control the perennial flood in Assam, take over procurement and distribution of all essential food grains by the government etc. (AASU 1974: 1-16). All these demands are apolitically democratic and progressive. Significantly, AASU in 1974, did not demand the expulsion of foreign nationals from Assam. They only demanded stoppage of flow of Bohiragotos to Assam only till Assam attains the position equal to the other developed states of India, and, they explicitly called it a short term demand (Ibid 12-13).

The movement, AASU wanted to build in 1974 on economic issue to remove the economic backwardness of Assam did not gain
popularity, the way 1972 movement on medium issue gained popularity. The movement was suppressed by the state government without much difficulties in the absence of popular support base. And, contrary to the expectation of the AASU leadership, they received no support from the Asamiya bourgeois press. This was, of course, very obvious, because the Asamiya bourgeois press was an inseparable part of the Asamiya ruling class which would not support such progressive demands as land reforms in the interest of peasants or nationalization of various sectors of economy. Nor, they can support a movement capable of uniting all sections of the people irrespective of race, religion, caste or language. Hence, was their opposition. The ruling class in Assam did not allow the AASU to succeed in leading a movement purely on economic issues. Besides, was AASU without any root among the peasants and the working class; and it was reluctant to link the movement with the broad left and democratic forces in the state. This demonstrates the pathetic plight in the absence of support from masses and the ruling class. However, one must admit that most of the issues raised through 21 point charter of demands were legitimate, progressive and needed (still needed) for removing Assam's perpetual backwardness.

It would be necessary to note that the students movement in Bihar and Gujarat, or even in Assam; railwaymen's nation wide strike reflected the crisis India was facing before imposition of
emergency. The emergency totally suppressed all these movements. Situation caused by the emergency, failure to build-up its movement on economic issues in 1974, its isolation from progressive political forces compelled many AASU activists to seriously introspect themselves. Many of them realized futility of fighting political and economic issues from an apolitical students organization isolated from the masses. They deserted AASU and most of them joined the Students' Federation of India (SFI). From emergency onwards, SFI gained popularity in educational institutions replacing the AASU led unions one after another. AASU gradually went into oblivion. However, after 1978 elections to the state legislature, AASU was gradually activised. Ideologically AASU had to undergo an internal transformation from left of the centre to the right of the centre. And, very significantly, the Asamiya bourgeois press which did not support the movement AASU wanted to build-up in 1974. They came together to save Assam from foreigners in 1979. The new coalition axiomatically reflect clearly the class nexus involved in the Assam movement.

Mangoldoi bye-election: Beginning of Mobilization

All Assam Students' Union in collaboration with the press, very successfully built-up public opinion among the Asamiyas that the bye election of Mangoldoi constituency should be postponed
till the names of all foreign nationals were deleted from the electoral rolls. They also demanded detection and deportation of foreign nationals from Assam. And, they successfully, convinced gradually a large section of the Asamiyas about the illegal inclusion of names of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls in all other constituencies in Assam. Simply speaking, they successfully transmitted the issue to the Asamiya masses and prepared them for a struggle to protect their identity. The leadership of the movement gave a call for a 12 hour Assam bandh on 8 June 1979. The response to the bandh was total and peaceful in the Brahmaputra valley. This bandh had given necessary confidence to the leadership. Significantly, this was the beginning of an active phase of protest actions and mass mobilisations.

However, Mangoldoi bye-election did not take place as the Janata government at the centre collapsed and obviously preparation for all bye-elections to the Lok-Sabha was cancelled on 22 August 1979.

Election to Lok Sabha: Greater Mobilization and Mass Participation

Charan Singh led central government which came after the fall of Morarji Desai led government, finally failed to secure a vote of confidence in Lok-Sabha. As a result, the Lok-Sabha was dissolved by a presidential order and fresh mid term poll was
ordered to be held in early part of January 1980. However, the Charan Singh government was allowed to function as a caretaker government till alternative arrangements were made. Failure of Janata experiment at the centre had its repercussion on its state units including Assam. The internal crisis within the Janata party in Assam was compounded further with the emergence of issue of Behiragatos and later foreign nationals which led to the collapse of Golap Borbora led Janata government in Assam. A breakway faction under the leadership of Jogen Hazarika formed government on 9 September 1979. The Jogen Hazarika Government remained inherently unstable and desperately tried to secure supports from various incompatible political parties. By the time Hazarika attained the leadership, the Assam movement too started gaining momentum. The emerging popular movement not only divided the people of Assam sharply, it also divided the legislators and political parties. In the process, the Hazarika government started crumbling immediately after its assumption of office.

The AASU-AAGSP gave a call for mass squatting throughout Assam in front of offices of deputy commissioners, sub-divisional officers, sub-deputy collectors and block-development officers for two days 6 and 7 September 1979. They demanded detection and deportation of foreign nationals from Assam, removal of their names from
the electoral rolls, concrete measures to stop influx of foreign nationals etc. This protest action found good response from the Asamiya masses in the Brahmaputra valley.

AASU again gave a call for mass picketing of all government and semi-government offices from 12 to 14 September. This action severely affected the functioning of government and other establishments including banks, Life Insurance Corporation, railways and post and telegraphs etc. Though these actions were largely peaceful; however, at some places the pickters came into clash with police which the leadership of the movement condemned. At the headquarters of Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC), Nazira, picketers came into clash with the employees. Most of them were non-Asamiyas, and cases of intimidations were reported. The ONGC personnels throughout the country went on strike demanding security to its personnels working in Assam. It should be noted that the ONGC had a sizeable number of non-Asamiya personnels.

On instruction from the Chief Election Commissioner the process of revising the electoral rolls started in Assam for 1980 mid-term poll to Lok Sabha. The AASU alleged that the electoral rolls are being prepared with lakhs of names of foreign nationals included therein. And, most other national political parties alleged that names of both religious and linguistic minorities were
deleted indiscriminately. This created a very conflicting and confusing situation in Assam.

The Hazarika government was in a fix, the revision of electoral rolls went on very slowly. Dates were declared for filling-up objections and claims, and publication of final draft respectively on 3 November and 3 December 1979. The process did not progress because on the instructions of the leadership of the movement the enumerators refused their work mid-way. Similarly, the North Eastern Federation of Master Printers too refused to print the draft rolls. These two actions compounded the impasse further.

The leadership of the movement gave a call for a mass rally at Gauhati on 6 October 1979. The response to the rally was overwhelming, about a lakh people participated in the impressive rally. The leadership announced a drive-out foreigners campaign on 9 October which was to be followed by a general strike. Around that time, clashes broke out between the Asamiya and the Bengalis in upper Assam, particularly at Tinsukia, Naharkatiya, Loomdooma etc. Some Bengali families fled away to Bengal in fear which alarmed the West Bengal government. Jyoti Basu took-up the issue with the central government to persuade the Government of Assam to stop the influx of Bengalis from Assam to West Bengal. Jyoti Basu's action was condemned by the leadership of the movement and they arranged burning of effigies of Jyoti Basu throughout the Brahmaputra valley. The
leadership of the movement not only made Basu a target, through this, they gave an anti-left turn to the movement. Assam was gradually plunging into lawlessness. The Chief Minister Hazarika declared that Assam will go to polls together with the rest of the country for electing members to new Lok Sabha. The leadership of the movement declared their determination to stop the election and demanded the removal of names of foreign nationals from the electoral rolls before holding any elections in Assam.

The leadership of the movement announced a weeklong action programme of offering satyagraha, courting arrest in front of the offices of the deputy commissioners, sub-divisional officers, etc. from 12 to 18 November 1979. In the first three days the response was not overwhelming. However, in the last three days this programme had shown massive participation of men, women and students. The government employees too participated in the programme defying the government's order. Those who had seen the last days satyagraha particularly at Guwahati, would sure to remember it for the lifetime as the vast sea of humanity gathered as never before in the areas around the deputy commissioner's court and high court, Pan Bazar, Dighali pukhuri areas to offer satyagraha. The state government constructed many temporary jails and even
these jails too failed to accommodate the inflating satyagrahis. The people gathered in disciplined manner, marched peacefully to court arrest. It had clearly demonstrated the massive support that the movement succeeded to build-up. Several lakhs of people courted arrest throughout the Brahmaputra valley. In Guwahati alone about 5 lakh people offered satyagraha.

By the time, the leadership had given the call for week-long satyagraha, they had sufficiently strengthened the organizational network throughout the Brahmaputra valley. AASU had already built up its units in almost all educational institutes dominated by the Asamiya students. Or the other hand, Assam Sahitya Sabha, one of the constituents of AAGSP had 700 branches all over Assam. The response of the people at this stage was so overwhelming that in many places, branches of AAGSP were set up not on the initiatives of the leaders but on the initiatives of the people. Not only the mass participation became highly spontaneous but at the same time building and strengthening of organizational network became largely spontaneous. As a result movement became stronger, more popular and mobilization became easier and systematic.

Alongwith the protest action programmes, the leadership
of the movement continued their talks with the state government and later with the caretaker central government and election commission. However, the government measures and assurances failed to satisfy the leadership which had gain more bargaining power in the wake of massive support. They continued to give call for various protest action one after another wherein masses participated in large number. In addition to the leadership at the apex, the leadership at the lower levels, also on many occasions gave call for various protest actions. Protest actions became very frequent and widespread.

The leadership of the movement were vehemently opposed to holding of Lok-Sabha elections in Assam with the rest of the country without removing the names of foreign nationals from the electoral rolls. Accordingly, they socialized the Asamiya masses through their platforms and the press. Protest actions intensified further when it was clear that the Election Commission was determined to go ahead with the election process in Assam, without substantially revising the electoral rolls. Earlier, as a result of non-cooperation of enumerators, refusal to print the draft rolls by the press owners in Assam, continuous abnormal situation for months together, forced the election commission to go ahead without substantial revision which was not acceptable to the leadership of the movement.
As the movement intensified, law and order situation deteriorated significantly. In such a situation, the coalition state government headed by Jogen Hazarika started crumbling. The situation created by the movement created dissensions among the legislators and political parties. Ultimately, the Hazarika government collapsed on 12 December 1979. For the first time in history, Assam came under Presidential rule and the legislature was kept in animated suspension. Also for the first time in Assam, a popular movement caused the fall of a state government.

Most of the national parties decided to participate in the election. The leadership of the movement continued to demand the postponement of election in Assam. On 3 and 4 December a 36 hours bandh was observed which was followed by picketing of central government and state government undertakings, from 5 to 8 December 1979. The leadership also demanded the postponement of examination to be conducted by the Board of Secondary Education. Later on, the leadership instructed the workers to gherao all the candidates till the last date for the filling of nominations. Residences of all candidates were gheraoed by the supporters of the movement day and night. The state government was forced to declare all educational institutes closed from 8 December 1979 till 11 January 1980.
As 10 December 1979 was the last date for filling nominations the leadership gave a call for an Assam bandh on that day. The bandh was effective. All the candidates did not try to come into confrontation with the supporters of the movement who had virtually gheraoed them for days together.

As a result no nomination was filed in the entire Brahmaputra valley. However, the lone exception was Begum Abida Ahmed, the widow of the late President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed. She was nominated by the Congress(I) as a candidate from Barpeta Lok Sabha constituency which was earlier held by her late husband. Her Guwahati residence at Lakhtokia was gheraoed by the supporters of the movement including the Asamiya Muslims of the same locality. In order to facilitate her to file her nomination, curfew was clamped in her locality and heavy police-escorts were provided to enable her to file nomination at Barpeta town, about 140 KM from Guwahati. Begum Abida Ahmed's party had to face repeated resistance from people throughout her way to Barpeta. At Brownapur, police lathi charged the people resisting the party. A young student leader Khargeswar Talukdar died as a result of violence. In Barpeta too, curfew was imposed to avoid popular resistance to enable Mrs Ahmed to file her nomination. The electoral officer found her papers
improper and rejected her candidature. So, ultimately no candidate was found in all 11 Lok Sabha constituencies and election was postponed in the whole of the Brahmaputra valley.

The death of young Talukdar gave a new impetus to the momentum of the movement. The leadership declared him as the first martyr of the movement. Talukdar's death was mourned throughout the Brahmaputra valley. Thousands of people visited his residence to pay their respect and sympathy. Posters depicting this young man was sold in thousands. Even a reputed Assamiya scholar who had repeatedly expressed his apprehension about the way leadership of the movement carried their movement and some of its manifested chauvinist dimensions, too paid a rich tribute to Talukdar and condemned the state repression (Gchain 1979).

The election to Lok-Sabha from Assam was stopped at the eleventh hour. Undoubtedly, it was a very significant success of the leadership and the supporters of the movement. However, after successful resistance to election in the Brahmaputra valley, normalcy did not return as the leadership of the movement were not satisfied with this remarkable success, they also tried to stop the election in the Barak valley, where they had neither support base nor any organizational base.
Seven candidates filed nominations for two Lok-Sabha seats from the Barak valley. It should be noted that Barak valley is predominantly a Bengali dominated valley. The percentage of Asamiya in this valley is lesser than even 1%. Obviously, the leadership could not take the movement to Barak valley; similar were the cases of language movement of 1960 and Medium movement of 1972. The great Asamiya-Bengali divide came into surface after a long dormancy.

ASSU and AAGSP carried out their demand to stop elections in the remaining 3 constituencies; 2 in Barak valley and 1 in the autonomous hill district. AASU and AAGSP leaders offered dharna in front of Raj Bhavan at Shillong which was backed up by non-cooperation in the Brahmaputra valley. The election commission declared the postponement of election from the autonomous hill district on the plea of not having enough personnels to conduct the election. However, the election commission remained firm on holding elections for remaining 2 seats in the Barak valley on 3 and 6 January 1980. One of the winning candidates from Barak valley found a berth in Mrs Gandhi's cabinet as a Minister of State.

Oil Blockade: Intensification of Protest and Pressure

The leadership continued their calls for various protest
actions. Most significant protest action after successful resistance against holding elections in 12 Lok Sabha seats, was the blockade of crude oil in Assam. Thousands of supporters of the movement on 27 December 1979 moved into various oil installations and refineries in Assam and stopped the flow of crude oil to outside Assam which led to the stoppage of functioning of Barauni refinery in Bihar. In economic terms, this action had cost nearly 3 crores of rupees per day (Sanjayya 1980:30).

The district administration backed up by police ordered the dispersal of picketers at Duliajan, the headquarters of Oil India Limited, in 18 January 1980. When the picketers refused to leave, the police resorted to tear gas shelling and then to firing, in which 4 persons were killed and many injured. Rabi Mitra, a Bengali technocrat and second man in the OIL's administrative hierarchy at Duliajan (the first being an Asamiya) when came to inquire about injured/deads at the hospital, was brutally killed by the mob.

The leadership of the movement mourned the death of 4 persons and declared them as martyrs of the movement. Obviously, they did not include Rabi Mitra in their list of martyrs as he did not die for the cause of the movement!
The Asamiya bourgeois press and the leadership described the Duliajan killings as Jaliwanwala Bagh of Assam. However, killings of Rabi Mitra of OIL and earlier murder of Dr Anjan Chakravorty at the Guwahati Medical College Hostel gave the Assam movement an anti-Bengali image. However, the popular response to oil blockade was overwhelming and total. The supporters picketed the oil installation day and night. Some of the picketers came from distant places by buses and some came walking several miles to make the blockade a success. The successful blockade also reflects the anger of average Asamiya against the centre for giving Assam a raw deal and discrimination in the matter of industrialization. The oil blockade obviously pressurized the centre to think seriously about the movement and to look for a solution. Perhaps, this was the most important pressure, the leadership exerted on the central government with the help of popular support.

North Kamrup Pogrom

Assam movement generated unprecedented mass mobilization and participation, which had shown the power of masses in stopping the elections and blocking the flow of crude oil from Assam to outside the state. The masses made the Assam movement a very significant movement that post-colonial India
has experienced. Protest actions were remarkably disciplined and peaceful. But, the overall law and order situation deteriorated with the beginning of Assam movement. When the rest of the country went to the polls, the thickly populated northern part of Kamrup district was rocked by civil violence for days together in which normal law and order machinery failed totally. Highly contradictory and conflicting reports came in about happenings in North Kamrup. The Peoples' Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) Delhi had sent a fact finding team to Assam to study violation of civil and democratic rights in Assam in the wake of Assam movement. Under the leadership of Prof. G.P. Despande together with two other academics of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. From a week long investigation, they found between August 1979 to February 15, 1980, altogether 23 persons were killed in Dibrugarh district alone, out of which 17 persons died in mob violence and 6 in police firing including 4 declared martyrs. Of 17 persons died in mob violence 1 was an Asamiya and remaining 16 non-Asamiyas (P.U.C.L. 1980). In North Kamrup, it was estimated that 200 to 300 persons died as a result of mob violence. Identity of only 80 deadbodies could be established and 78 of them belonged to linguistic and religious minorities; and 1 out of remaining 2 was a CRPF jawan (Ibid). Nearly
25,000 people were rendered homeless as a result of violence and destruction. It is very difficult to accept that violence of such scale took place without any organized pre-planning. Those who were killed in large number, in fact were not non-Asamiyas, rather, they were neo or Na-Asamiyas.

As the district administration totally failed, army had to come-in. Army obviously took strong arm methods to contain the violence. The Asamiya bourgeois press focussed mainly on the army atrocities on the Asamiyas totally black-outing the civilian violence in north Kamrup. The leadership of the movement did not try at all to pacify the violent mobs. The Asamiya ruling class obviously tried to hide their sins they committed in north Kamrup by raising the issue of only atrocities against the Asamiyas. An open discussion on secular lines and true information on the victims and killers would have definitely helped to avert such pogrom in future. A ruling class would not like to abjure violence, if it helped their class interest, and, they would not hesitate to provoke killings and protect the killers they provoked so systematically.

End of Political Instability at the Centre: Return of Mrs Gandhi

In the mid-term poll held in early January 1980, the people gave a clear mandate in favour of Congress(I) which won
more than two-third majority in the Lok-Sabha and formed a new government at the centre under the Prime Ministership of Mrs Indira Gandhi. This ended the care-taker government and the Janata experiment. Political instability at the centre ended. Contrary to expectation of a sector of leadership of the movement, who expected an instable and weak government at the centre in which they would have more bargaining power. However, this did not happen, a very strong government was installed at the centre. Return of Mrs Gandhi to power within less than 3 years, ended many uncertainties and confusions about the central government.

Only after 3 days of assumption of office of the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi sent her emissaries to meet the leaders of AASU at Guwahati. AASU too, responded positively to the proposal of talks with the Prime Minister. Accordingly, a meeting between the Prime Minister and the AASU leaders was arranged in Delhi. Significantly, the other component of the leadership of the movement the AAGSP was not invited for the talks in Delhi. A nine member delegation including a non-student interpreter air dashed to Delhi for talks.

Negotiations: Crystallization of Issue and Demands

AASU submitted a written memorandum to the Prime Minister
on 2 February 1980, wherein they expressed their position as to the issues and demands and a way-out from the impasse.

The Problem

The main cause behind this mass upheaval in Assam is the monstrous problem of infiltration by illegal foreigners, mainly from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Nepal, and to a less extent from Bhutan and Burma. This has led to an abnormal increase in population to the tune of 40-50 lakhs, over and above the normal increase in population. (Incidentally, Assam has won quite a few prizes in family planning). That this abnormal increase in population is due to infiltration is an irrefutable fact, agreed to even by the most biased critics and detractors of this peaceful non-violent movement (A.A.S.U. 1980:1).

The Demands of AASU and AAGSP

(Quoted from the Memorandum to the Prime Minister of India submitted by AASU and 2nd Feb.'80).

1) Foreign nationals must be detected and deported from our country.

2) Names of foreign nationals must be removed from the concerned electoral rolls before holding any election in Assam.
Inclusion of names of foreign nationals in electoral rolls in future must be made impossible with the help of adequate and strong election machinery.

3) Borders of India with neighbouring countries must be fully protected to effectively check infiltration.

4) Indian voters residing in Assam should be issued identity cards with photographs affixed.

5) Necessary constitutional safeguards should be provided to the people of North Eastern Region for the next 15/20 years by making necessary constitutional provisions for the protection of the identity of the indigenous people of the region.

6) The Government of Assam should be free to reject any (citizenship) certificate issued by the district authorities of West Bengal and Tripura.

7) We demand that, the authority to grant citizenship certificate delegated to the state Governments, should be withdrawn by the Central Government from the state Governments, so that those foreigners who are detected and deported from Assam do not come back armed with citizenship certificates issued by other states (Ibid:2).
Additional Demand

(i) Fresh nominations must be invited, when election for Karbi Anglong and North Cachar is announced after detection of foreigners and their deportation. (Ibid: 2).

Other proposals

(1) The National Register of Citizens (NRC) of 1951 should be made up-to-date by taking into consideration the additions to the number of each family since the time of compilation of the Register.

(2) The comparison of the NRC of 1951 with the successive electoral rolls since 1952 will also be helpful in making it up-to-date.

(3) A free zone devoid of trees and houses should be created all along the border and any one crossing it without valid travel document from either side must be shot at. We attach great importance to this suggestion. We have reached a stage when threat to the state of Assam and to the country can no longer be ignored.

(4) Birth and Death Registers at all levels in Blocks, Villages, Towns etc. should be strictly maintained
in order to prevent further infiltration into the voters' lists.

(5) The number of check posts should be increased so as to enable one check post to be visible from the other (Ibid: 2-3).

The written memorandum crystalized the issues and demands of the movement. The leadership through their argument in the memorandum and other writings in the media successfully placed the problem not only before the Prime Minister of the country but before the whole nation. Till then, however, the leadership of the movement could not say categorically about the number of foreign nationals living in Assam illegally. However, in a later publication AASU (No date, probably 1980) categorically estimated the number of foreign nationals in Assam at 45 lakhs of whom 15 lakhs have entered their names in the electoral rolls. There may be some dispute about the number but there was no dispute to the fact that immigration from Bangladesh and Nepal to Assam had taken place during the post-colonial period. It would, however, be important to note here that the leadership of the movement made no reference to the status of the refugees vis-à-vis the foreign nationals. To them, those who came after 1951 are foreign nationals in Assam. Hence, their
definition of foreigners also included the refugees of erstwhile East Pakistan.

Though, the first round of talks between the centre and the AASU failed, but very significantly, the issue raised by the leadership of the movement found recognition as a serious problem before the government and the nation. Perhaps, this was the biggest gain the movement had achieved from the first round of talks. On the other hand, the government of India accepted in principle first 4 out of 7 demands. But, the government needed more time to decide on remaining 3 demands. By conceding even 4 demands in principle, the government of India had to accept that the foreign nationals living in Assam should be detected and deported; and their names should be removed from the electoral rolls before holding any election in Assam and making it impossible for a foreign national to register his name in the electoral rolls; borders should be protected effectively to stop future immigration; and finally, identity cards for the voters in Assam. Acceptance of all these 4 demands represents the success of the movement. First round of talks had given the Assam movement a much better coverage in all medias.

However, the negotiation bogged down because both the
parties failed to arrive at a mutually acceptable definition of foreign national in Indian sub-continental context, cut-off year for detection and deportation of foreign nationals from Assam. On the other hand, the government of India could not accept the demand (No 5) to provide constitutional safeguards to the people of entire north-east for next 15-20 years. Except in Assam, most other states in the north-east had some kind of protections like inner-line permit, not allowing non-natives of the state to acquire property etc. Besides these, tribal dominated states, had constitutional provisions to safeguard their interests.

AASU's demand No 6, wherein, they had chosen to reject any citizenship certificate issued by only West Bengal and Tripura Governments exposed their anti-left orientation. At times, when other regional and left parties were demanding more power to the states, the leadership of the movement wanted to make the Government of India all powerful at the cost of state autonomy, by conferring it the sole rights to issue citizenship certificates. Therefore, such demand failed to gain acceptability from various national parties. Though the first round of talks failed, it paved the way for further negotiations between the leadership of the movement and the government of India. We, however, would not describe the talks as failure because, it definitely had certain positive points as stated earlier.
Bargaining and Pressure: Negotiations and protest: actions together

AASU described the first round of talks as failure and expressed their eagerness to go in for further talks. After the first round of talks, the leadership of the movement thought it important to intensify their movement in order to pressurise the government of India to get upperhand in the bargaining. The Government of India too, adopted similar tactic, through prolonged talks, it wanted to weaken the movement with the passage of time, whereby it would be able to mount pressure on the leadership of the movement to come into a settlement as wanted by the government. Hence, we see a series of talks, formal and informal, between the leadership of the movement and the Government of India.

On 3 February 1980, the leadership of the movement organized rallies throughout the Brahmaputra valley to pay homage to the martyrs of the movement. The programme of mass rally was followed by an indefinite satyagraha in front of offices of the deputy commissioners, sub-divisional officers, sub-deputy collectors and block-development officers. Blockade of crude oil continued, however, the refineries in Assam were allowed to resume their production from 14 February 1980. The
protest action continued. Again talks between the Home Minister Giani Zail Singh and the leaders of movement started at Guwahati. The indefinite satyagraha programme was withdrawn. Meanwhile all major political parties Congress I, Congress U, Janta, CPI, CPM, SUCI, PTCA and RCPI came into consensus and accepted 25 March 1971 as the cut-off date to detect and deport foreign nationals. However, the leadership of the movement expressed their strong opposition to the consensus evolved by various political parties. They wanted 1951 as cut-off year.

Three members of Parliament from neighbouring states had made an appeal to the leadership of the movement to call-off the movement because it affected supplies and communication in the entire north-east India. Again negotiation started, legal points were raised and no party was in a mood to concede to other's view point. In such a situation, negotiations failed once again.

Again on 3 March 1980, the Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi came to Assam for talks with the leaders of the movement. Again both sides failed to come into consensus and ultimately talks failed. However, Mrs Gandhi made it a point to talk to the leadership of All Assam Minorities Students' Union (AAMSU).
and listened to their apprehensions and fears about the

demands of the Assam movement. They declared their readiness
to accept 1971 as the cut-off year for the Nepalis. It seems

AAMSU came into existence under the patronage of the Congress

as an antithesis to AASU.

The leadership of the movement again resorted to

protest actions and kept their option wide for negotiations

with the Government of India. The Government too, took

similar tactic, it kept its door open for negotiations and

gradually came-up with repressive measures like imposition

of disturbed area notification, collective fines, suspension

of government employee for participating in the movement, pay-
cut and, at times, indiscriminate arrests under ordinary

laws and national security act etc. Despite application of

such draconian laws, the movement did not lose its tempo and

vigour. Neither the Government of India nor the leadership

of the movement could take upper-hand in negotiations till

the mid 1980.

In order to mount more pressure on the government,

the leadership of the movement imposed ban on movement of

jute, bamboo and plywood from Assam to outside in April 1980.

It seems, this blockade instead of pressurizing the government,
pressurized the ordinary peasants, particularly, the Na-Asamiya Muslims who are the major grower of jute in Assam. The whole-sale traders of jute, mainly the Marwaris took the advantage of the situation. They forced the peasants to sell their product at an abysmally low price. The bamboo blockade also affected the rural masses in Assam as the price had gone down very sharply and there were lesser buyers. However, the blockade of plywood affected some traders and manufacturers. But they were capable of overcoming the difficulties created by the blockade through their money power very unlike the ordinary peasants who suffered significantly because of jute and bamboo blockade. The oil blockade made the refineries in Assam non-functional and it created extreme scarcity of kerosene which particularly affected the lower middle class in towns and entire rural masses. However, the leadership of the movement conspicuously exempted the most valuable items, other than oil, i.e. tea from the blockade. Hence, the blockade did not affect the foreign capitalist, big-Indian capitalists and the Asamiya tea-planters. This amply demonstrates the class nexus between the leadership on one hand and foreign, Indian and regional capital on the other.  

The government tried to remove the blockade of oil
on 19 April 1980. The Central Reserved Police Force (CRPF) removed the picketers from Narangi pumping station forcefully and the district administration imposed curfew in Guwahati city. Immediately after the news of removal of picketers from the oil installations spreaded, a large number of people came out to the streets in protest and started marching towards Narangi. It was estimated that about five lakhs of people came out to the street for protest and procession. The sea of humanity made the armed forces absolutely armless. The supporters of the movement made the curfew absolutely inoperative. Kamaleswar Bora, the Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup who declared the curfew himself in the morning had to withdraw his own order few hours after its imposition. The curfew fiasco affected the credibility of the government and once again boosted the morale of the leadership and the supporters of the movement. The oil blockade started once again vigorously.

The leadership of the movement continued their blockades and protest actions of various forms—satyagraha, march to Dispur to gherao the sitting MLAs. Even at one stage, AASU declared its plan to prepare a National Register of Citizens through its volunteer force Sweswa Sevak Bahini (SSB). It also declared its intention to issue citizenship certificates also.
Both these moves were however given-up. The tribals of Assam opposed these moves in very strong terms. It seems that these two plans were used to threaten the government. However, at the late part of 1980, the mass response had shown the sign of gradual erosion. Therefore, from the later part of 1980, we see more bandhs, non-cooperation, black-out, Janta curfew, social boycott etc. than satyagraha, squatting, procession etc. Obviously, the government took the advantage of erosion of mass response to protest actions. With the help of army, the government removed the oil blockade. By 11 November 1980, Barauni refinery became functional again. The leadership at their own allowed the refineries in Assam to function but continued their blockade/oil to outside Assam. The successful removal of oil blockade gave the government an upperhand in the bargaining. The leadership of the movement had already withdrawn the blockade of jute, bamboo and plywood.

Transformation of Goals: the changing cut-off years

At the beginning of the movement as we have noted earlier, the leadership wanted 1951 as cut-off year for detecting and deporting the foreign nationals from Assam and declared their vow to strictly adhere to 1951. Also they wanted the National Register of Citizens (NRC) as basic document
to determine the nationality in Assam. Significantly, they had shown absolutely no leniency about the cut-off year when their support base was wide and the mass response to any protest action was overwhelming and massive.

However, gradual but slow erosion of their support base and popular response to protest actions, they had to change their cut-off year and transformed their position on certain points. By the end of 1980, the leadership of the movement and the Government of India agreed on two points that (1) 1951-61 entrants should not be deported and (2) all post 1971 entrants should be deported. However, disagreement continued over the entrants of 1961-71. At one stage, there was a proposal that the burden of 1961-71 entrants should be shared by all states. Later on, it was realized that such morally right decision was practically impossible to implement by unsettling the already settled people. Significantly, the Governor of Assam once appealed the leadership to accept 1967 as the cut-off year for detection of foreign nationals from Assam. The leadership rejected the proposal.

In our analysis of the Assam movement, we are deliberately refraining from going into the minute details about the negotiations which has already been done by a scholar up to
December 1982 (Murty 1983). Between January 1980 to January 1983, the government and the leadership had no less than 50 rounds of talks at various levels. In some talks, the government invited the opposition parties to participate. All opposition parties wanted 1971 as cut-off year which the leadership of the movement did not agree. This also made the leadership of the movement politically isolated from the all India parties. At the time, when the movement was at its peak, the leadership of the movement declared that all India parties have become totally irrelevant in Assam in the wake of Assam movement. The political isolation of the leadership of movement at the all India level also explains as to why they could develop friendship with the RSS and BJP elements though their apparent ideological position was different. The RSS-BJP elements took the advantage of their political isolation, and became their friends. The RSS-BJP elements helped the leadership of the movement in improving their image through their men in media and other fronts. Some of the prominent members of all India standing having RSS-BJP connections glorified the demands and praxis of the Assam movement outside Assam. However, most of the journalists with secular outlook from outside Assam focused several times on the
the nexus between the leadership of the movement and the RSS-BJP element in the Assam movement, particularly in providing the para-military training to ASAM's volunteer force, the SS3. Its Commander-in-Chief was alleged to be a RSS man. Besides, the RSS-BJP elements mediated between the leadership of the movement and the powerful Marwari businessmen in Assam. Obviously, they succeeded in blunting the anti-Marwari edge of the Asamiya militancy.

The government used delaying tactics in negotiations. The leadership of the movement in 1980 used to get earliest possible appointments with the Prime Minister and Home Minister immediately after their arrival in Delhi. Later on, they were forced to wait for days together and had to satisfy themselves on many occasions with the officials of the Home Ministry. Of course, they continued to receive 5 star hospitality and to and fro air travel for their talks in Delhi. The government expected the leadership to toe their line. Meanwhile with the erosion of its support base, the leadership had changed their tactics from mass political action to selected actions of pressure on the government and the non-supporters in Assam. The delay in finding a negotiated settlement, gradual erosion of popular support base and response to mass political
action, continuous bellicosous socialization of the Asamiya bourgeois press influenced many youths to resort to violence to build-up pressure. The government underestimated this negative development. Government's delaying tactics, 5 star hospitality to the leadership of the movement and other allurements for benefits failed to bring the leadership to the Congress I's line. We are discussing under separate heading the strong destabilizing affects of the Assam movement in which 4 Ministries collapsed within 4 years and Assam came under President's rule for 3 times. As the state legislature stood dissolved in the wake of destabilization in March 1982, the state was supposed to so in for an election to elect a new legislature by March 1983. When the talks failed again in early January 1983, the Government of India declared its intention to hold election to the state legislature in February. This created an unprecedented impasse. We would like to emphasise that before facing the unprecedented impasse, Assam movement had already passed through the stages of incipiency, growth and maturity. And, its support base started declining. We have also shown in our discussion in this chapter as to how the issue, organization and even goals of the movement experience transformation as an inherent part of growth and decline of Assam movement.