Chapter 5

Assam Movement: Impasse To Institutionalization

Before going into discussion on the impasse and aftermath of 1983 elections, it would be pertinent to discuss some inseparable aspects and issues related to the Assam movement, i.e., social and class base of the movement, opponents of the movement, number of foreign national in Assam, role played by the press in supporting and opposing the Assam movement, means for reaching goals and destabilizing affects of the movement in the parliamentary politics. Discussion on these vital issues would enable us to understand the Assam movement from larger perspectives.

Social and Class Base of the Assam Movement

In order to understand a social movement sociologically, it is imperative to comprehend the social as well as class base of the movement so as to understand its nature and interest it represents. The Assam movement emerged very popularly in the Brahmaputra valley and gained mass character in the later part of 1979. However, the movement failed to penetrate into the other valley of the state, i.e., the Barak valley. The movement also failed to penetrate into the remaining two hill districts of Assam. Geographically the movement confined to the Brahmaputra valley, the traditional homeland of the Asamiyas.
Even in the tribal areas of the Brahmaputra valley the response of the tribals to the Assam movement was weak. This position was weakened further when the AASU demanded the withdrawal of certain constitutional facilities given to the scheduled tribes. In mid 1980, AASU declared that it might prepare a national register of citizens and issue citizenship certificated to the people of Assam. Though this dangerous decision was given up later, the tribals were opposed to such moves. They felt that they are the first autochthons/natives, therefore, they do not need any certificates from those who entered Assam later than them. They too, were scared of Assamiya's big-brotherly attitude in Assam. Again, the black-tribals of tea-plantation also remained largely lukewarm to the movement. At the initial stage of the movement, there were abrasions between the black-tribals and the supporters of the movement which alarmed both. And, both accepted to maintain safe distance from each other.\(^1\)

The movement also did not receive any support from the Hindu-Bengalis of the Brahmaputra valley in addition to the Hindu Bengalis of Barak valley. So also, it did not succeed in building-up its base among the Na-Asamiya Muslims dominated pockets of old Goalpara, Kamrup and Nagaon districts.
Besides, the Nepalis throughout Assam remained apprehensive about the Assam movement. The Hindu Bengalis, the Nepalis and the Na-Asamiya Muslims would together constitute nearly 40% of the total population of the state. Not only that these three groups did not respond to the movement, the leadership of the movement also did not seek their support to their cause; rather they labelled them very indiscriminately as foreigners in Assam. These three groups together formed the constituency for the counter movement.

The Asamiya Muslims were there with the movement from the very beginning. But later on, they became apprehensive about the leadership of the movement because of their coalition and friendship with the RSS and BJP elements. Even during the anti-election period in February 1983, Nurul Hussain, the AASU Vice President, an Asamiya Muslim, presided over the AASU and led it in the absence of its regular President Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, who was behind the bar at that time. However, the Nellie Massacre, killings at Chaulkhowa Chaporri and bomb-blast at Balatu Bazar near Hajo forced the Asamiya Muslims to rethink about their continuous support to the movement. When the Muslim leaders of the AASU raised the pertinent question of involvement of RSS-BJP elements in the movement and their anti-Muslim activities, they were expelled from the AASU. Their expulsion shows the power of RSS elements in the students Organization. Because of these developments the support
base among the Asamiya Muslims eroded substantially. It also severely affected the secular credentials of AASU both inside and outside Assam.

The response of large non-caste groups like the Ahoms and the Koch-Rajbonshis in Upper Assam and Lower Assam respectively was largely lukewarm to the movement. Then, socially who formed the solid base for the movement? It was the high caste Asamiya Hindus composed of Brahmins, Gonaks, Kayasthas, Kolitas and Gossain-Mohantas, who provided the social support base to the movement. The combined strength of all these castes would be roughly about 8% of the total population of the State. Both, socially and culturally, they are the dominant group in Assam. Because of their social and cultural advancement in a backward economy, they have become virtually the value Setters and the value givers of the Asamiya nationality. Besides, the dominant majority of the Asamiya middle class, businessmen, contractors, small capitalists etc. belong to these caste groups. They dominate state administration, police, professions, educational institutes and powerful regional press and media. Though, they are numerically small, they are powerful and socially conspicuous. They formed the solid constituency for the Assam movement. They supported, strengthened and defended the movement very strongly. The Assam movement also reflect their weakness,
multi-religious, bias and limitations in a multi-racial, multi-ethnic society.

The Assam movement reached its peak in late 1979 and continued till the mid of 1980. Gradually, its support base started eroding. Therefore, we can see changes in the nature of the movement in the wake of its erosion of support base. We have already noted the role of the Asamiya ruling class in the Assam movement. Though, officially, the movement was dominantly led by the AASU, as we have mentioned already that it was not a students movement. Behind the AASU, stood solidly the weak and small Asamiya bourgeoisie composed of few tea-planters, owners of the bourgeois press, Asamiya professionals, bureaucrats, middle class, contractors, owners of influential mobile-theatre and the rural gentry. The rural gentry attained some success in bringing a section of the Asamiya peasantry. Additionally, the movement also received support from the educated and unemployed youths of rural Assam. They gave aggressiveness to the movement in rural areas.

To be precise, geographically the support base of the Assam movement confined to the Asamiya dominated areas of the Brahmaputra valley alone; socially, the high castes were the most vocal supporters of the movement. Response of other
groups ranges from opposition to lukewarm support. Though a
section of the Asamiya peasantry participated under the
leadership of the rural gentry on nationality slogans and
ideology, the support base in terms of class, dominantly confined
to the Asamiya middle class. Like any other movement based
on nationality appeal, the Assam movement too was a multi-class
movement in nature.

Opposition to Assam Movement: Right and Left

A French social scientist observed that without oppo-
sition, a social movement no longer exists, or more precisely, it
no longer exists as a social movement. ....... A social move-
ment exists because certain ideals are not recognized (Alain
Touraine quoted in Rocher 1972 : 443) according to him "in the
analysis of social movements, then, it is equally essential
to identify the opponents which a movement attacks as it is
to recognize those whose interest it aims to defend. In addition,
the group whose interest the movement represents and the group
of opponents often complement each other in various ways"
(Ibid : 443).

Before discussing the opponents, it must, however be
admitted at the outset that none of the opponents disputed the
issue raised by the movement that foreigners should not be allowed
to participate in the electoral process; they should be detected and
deported. However, there were apparent disputes and oppositions to the way the movement was conducted, the methods it used directly or indirectly to attain its goals, cut-off point, definition of foreigners in India etc.

The Congress (I) as a political party at the centre which had to look into the interests of all sections of society living in Assam while solving the problem raised by the movement. However, the Congress leadership did not express its opposition to the movement. But the way Congress wanted to participate in the Lok Sabha election in 1980 and holding and participating in the 1983 election to the state legislature shows the opposition of Congress to the Assam movement. In the protracted negotiations, the Government of India did not agree with the leadership of the movement the way they wanted a solution. Ultimately when the movement lost its earlier tempo and vigour, the government of India virtually forced the leadership of the movement to accept a solution of former's choice.

It would be important to recollect that the Youth Congress and Chatra Parishad of West Bengal organized a road blockade of goods traffic to and from Assam from 24 March 1980. However, the CPM led left front government took a firm action against the blockade and arrested 500 volunteers at Siliguri and
on the next day police had to lathi charge the volunteers squatting on the railway tracks. Not only that, youth and students' organizations affiliated to the CPM started counter demonstration in three towns in West Bengal against the Congress I sponsored blockade against Assam, and educated the people against such dangerous move. Because of the strong opposition of the CPM and the masses of West Bengal, the Congress I had to give-up their blockade within a few days. Meanwhile, it had inflicted enough damage to the cause of the Bengalis living in Assam. In addition to that reactionary move, the Congress I volunteer also attacked the Calcutta office of The Assam Tribune. These chauvinist actions of Congress I in West Bengal were utilized by their counterparts in Assam to whip-up anti-Bengali and anti-Bengal feeling among the Assamya masses.

Besides Congress I, Amra Bangali and the Bengali bourgeois press too tried on many occasions to whip-up Bengali chauvinism mainly to destabilize the Left Front Government in West Bengal. In such a situation, Jyoti Basu, the Chief Minister of West Bengal was forced to voice his resentment against the influx of Bengali refugees from Assam to West Bengal in the wake of Assam movement. The Bengali bourgeois press tried to present Jyoti Basu as anti-Bengali, and their counterparts in
Assam, the Asamiya bourgeois press tried to present him as rabidly anti-Asamiya leader. The class nexus between the Bengali and Asamiya press became too obvious to spell out in details. At times, Congress leaders attacked the movement as secessionist, anti-national, and at times, the Prime Minister herself would praise the student leaders. However, it must be admitted that the Congress I had neither sincere workers nor strong organizational network capable of politically opposing the movement in Assam. Therefore, it had to depend excessively on the Prime Minister and the bureaucracy besides its divisive policy in Assam.

When the Asamiya dominated Brahmaputra valley experienced political turmoil and abnormal situation for years together; the Bengali dominated Barak valley remained peaceful. Many leaders from Barak valley opposed only the anti-Bengali aspects of the movement. They also opposed the movement on the ground that because of the movement, though educational institutes in Barak valley functioned normally very unlike the other valley, examinations could not be held as the examination conducting bodies like Board of Secondary Education, Gauhati University etc. were located in the Brahmaputra valley. Besides, when the supporters of the Assam movement successfully stopped the election to Lok Sabha from 12 constituencies in the
- Brahmaputra valley; the Barak valley went to the polls peacefully for 2 seats. It seems the position of these two valleys were determined by sensitive issue like language, nationality and identity etc. Though both valleys are part of the same state, their political wavelength is not at all similar on the issue raised by the Assam movement. In addition to people of Barak valley, the Assam movement also made the Na-Asamiya Muslims, Hindu Bengalis and Nepalis of the Brahmaputra valley apprehensive about the real motive or hidden forces behind the Assam movement. The organized program of Na-Asamiya Muslims and Hindu Bengalis in North Kamrup living for long period and virtually Asamiyaized alarmed these commities. They considerd the Assam movement as a threat to their existence as Indian minorities in Assam. Publications of maps in the Asamiya bourgeois press showing the Na-Asamiya Muslim and Hindu Bengali dominated areas as the Bengladeshi dominated areas. On the other hand, the movement did not distinguish between the East Pakistan refugees and the foreigners. Because of their common origin both these two groups were labelled as foreigners. There may be few foreigners among them but describing two major communities together having atleast 35% of total population of the state since 1951 as foreign national was too simplistic. It seems the labelling was done deliberately. This forced the Bengalis and Na-Asamiya Muslims to organize them against the Assam
movement. As an anti-thesis to AASU, All Assam Minorities Students Union (AAMSU) and similarly as an antithesis to AAGSP, Citizens Right Preservation Committee (CRPC) of Assam came into existence. Like AASU and AAGSP, they too worked together politically. Behind them, stood the right wing politicians of their community, a section of Bengali middle class and Muslim agar merchants etc. In addition to them, the Congress also encouraged them to build-up their counter movement to contain the Assam movement. However, instead of containing the Assam movement, it strengthened the Assam movement significantly.

In fact AAMSU and CRPC built-up counter-movement in the areas dominated by the Na-Asamiyas and Bengali Hindus throughout the Brahmaputra valley. However, their mobilization stood no where near the Assam movement. Their action had sharpened the social divide in Assam. Instead of going for a meaningful dialogue to understand and appreciate each other's demands and apprehensions, the leadership of both the Assam movement and its resultant counter movement behaved in such a way that divided the masses of Assam sharply; and both were forced to look into the centre as their saviours. In the process they strengthened each other's movement towards a non-secular and dangerous directions wherein ordinary masses
became the victims. They together also increased the bargaining power of the Congress. A cautious student of social movement would not fail to situate the nexus between the leadership of the Assam movement and its counter movement in eroding the support base of the left forces in Assam through systematic sharpening of primordial loyalties.

Again, one can see the nexus between the Rastriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Jamat-E-Islami Hind (JIH) in communalizing Hindus and Muslims respectively in Assam. From the very beginning of the movement, the RSS played a very active role in envenoming the minds of the Hindus. According to them, Assam was in the process of becoming a Muslim majority state in India. And, the Muslims are silently invading Assam to make it a part of Islamic world. Therefore, the Muslims whom the RSS called infiltrators should be deported from Assam and refugees should be allowed to stay back in Assam. Thé JIH through their publications, they started envenoming the minds of the Muslim readers. Difference between them manifested in the question of supporting the movement. The RSS whole-heartedly supported the movement, and JIH did not support the movement. But, it succeeded in transmitting fundamentalist's position on the Muslim question in Assam. Though, the RSS line on the
Assam question differed significantly from the official position of the leadership of the movement, politically RSS became an ally of the leadership of the Assam movement, which made all secular minded persons apprehensive about the real character of the leadership of the movement. Acceptance of RSS support led to the erosion of secular image of the Assam movement. Except RSS and Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), all other national parties at least in principle differed significantly on cut-off year. However, among the national parties, the CPM was regarded by the leadership of the movement and their supporters as the major opponent of the movement.

It seems that the CPM did not oppose at all the fundamental demand of detection and deportation of foreign nationals from Assam with due legal process. However, it was opposed to violence used against the minorities living in Assam. It was opposed to, like all other political parties to the demand of making 1951 as cut-off year. From the very beginning of Assam movement, members and sympathizers of left forces were attacked. From the beginning of Assam movement till mid April 1983, 29 members of the CPM, 9 members of the CPI, 1 member of RCPI, 10 members of the CPI (ML), in total 49 members of various left parties were murdered (Mannan 1983:67)
for their refusal to accept the dictate of the supporters of the movement. Hundreds were beaten-up, attacked, terrorized and humiliated in broad daylight. Even a reputed scholar Prof. Hiren Gohain of Gauhati University was brutally attacked for his critical views on Assam movement. Another distinguished Assamiya journalist-novelist Mrs. Nirupama Burgohain had to face humiliations. Many college teachers and students with left views had to face violence, intimidation and humiliations from students. In most cases authorities connived with the lumpen students. Many people had to face social boycott and ostracization from their neighbours. Undoubtedly, the left was the major political group which suffered immensely for their ideological commitment. As noted earlier, the left forces accepted the basic thesis of the movement that the foreigner must not participate in the electoral process and they should be detected and deported; but what they did not accept was certain anti-democratic and anti-secular bellicosous tendencies generated by the movement. They expressed their opinion critically through their organs and platforms which the leadership of the movement found too bitter. Hence, was the call to liquidate the left forces from Assam. The apparent conflict on various issues between the left and the leadership of the movement was in fact a hidden form of class conflict.
The left would have definitely supported the Assam movement as a national struggle had it helped to advance the class struggle or even democracy and secularism in Assam.

Foreign Nationals in Assam

In order to understand the Assam movement, it would be pertinent to understand the game of numbers related to foreigners in Assam. The Assam movement was apparently started in order to stop the participation of foreign nationals in Assam's electoral process and their deportation from Assam. Therefore, the number of foreign nationals is crucial to determine the extent of foreigners' infiltration to Assam and their numerical strength in order to comprehend the extent of threat to Assam identity. Though the movement continued for long 6 years 1979-85, yet none from leadership could very precisely ascertain the number of foreign nationals living in Assam illegally. Fantastic and inconsistent figures were cited in the press and various other platforms of the movement. The estimated number of foreign nationals in Assam ranged from 2 lakhs to 77 lakhs.

According to Jogen Hazarika (1979), the Chief Minister, the number of foreign nationals in Assam was 2 lakhs. Two regional parties of Assam, AJD and PLP estimated the number of
foreign nationals respectively at 40 lakhs and 13 lakhs. According to an ideologue of the movement who collected his information from a students organization, the number of foreign nationals living illegally was 45-50 lakhs (Barooah 1984:291) out of Assam's total population of 1,46,25000 (Census of India 1971.) Another political scientist estimated the number of foreign nationals in Assam upto 1981 at 40 lakhs (Reddi 1984: 265). Another supporter Prof. Biswaser Hazarika estimated the number at 77 lakhs. AASU in one of their publications places the number of infiltrators at over 45 lakhs of who over 15 lakhs have entered their names in the electrical rolls (AASU 1980:2). If one accepts such fantastic figures than the percentage of foreign nationals would range between 10% to about 50% of the total population of the state. It seems even the supporters had no consensus about the number of foreign nationals. On the other hand, the definitions of the foreign nationals kept on changing in the course of movement. As we know when the movement was at its peak, all those who came across the border after 1951 was regarded as foreign nationals. When the movement was losing its tempo, the leadership of the movement upgraded the cut-off point to 1961. By the time leadership signed the Assam accord in 1985, they had to accept 1967 as the cut-off year for determining the foreigners in Assam and in reality they had to accept 1971 as the cut-off year for
all practical purpose in Assam. Finally, the leadership had nullified their own estimates and own base years.

Even after signing the accord with the Government of India, the leadership of the movement in a press conference stated the number of post 1971 foreign nationals in Assam was 20 lakhs (The Sunday Statesman, 18 August, 1985). All these figures were arrived at without going into the details of complex demographic transformation of Assam and leadership's changing definitions of foreign nationals. It is obviously very difficult to ascertain the number of foreign nationals between 1951-71 and during post 1971 period.

An economist estimated the number of foreign nationals in Assam between 1951-71 at about 10 lakhs (Gogoi 1988:4). A prominent observer of the Assam movement estimated the number of foreign nationals at 5 lakhs (Gohain 1982:31). Guha observed that the number of post 1951 settlers with questionable citizenship status would be in case exceeds 13 lakhs (Guha 1980:1710). Of these 13 lakhs, less than 3 lakhs appear to be post 1971 settlers (ibid). Guha's estimate is very similar to Gogoi's estimate. To us, their estimates look quite reasonable than others who have provided extremely inflated figures.
The fantastic numbers provided by the leadership of the movement and their supporters and collaborators in the press served two distinct purpose simultaneously: (1) it deepened sharply the fear of the Asamiyas of losing their numerical dominance in Assam and their identity; and (2) it also made the Bengalis and the neo-Asamiya groups suspicious about the real motives of the leadership of the movement because such inflated numbers they provided must have included many Indians in the category of foreigners. The confusion created by wild estimates sharpened the division between the Asamiyas and the Bengalis on one hand, and between the Asamiyas and the neo-Asamiyas on the other. The fear of the Bengalis and Na-Asamiya Muslims was compounded when the Asamiya bourgeois press repeatedly identified the Bengali and Na-Asamiya Muslims inhabited areas as the area of alleged Bangladeshi nationals. The game of numbers played by the leadership of the movement, their supporters and the Asamiya bourgeois press contributed together in locating the constituency of the movement and its resultant counter movement.

In the field, when we asked some of the supporters to point-out the foreigners, all of them pointed either to Hindu Bengalis or Na-Asamiya Muslims as foreigners. These two groups
together with the Nepalis living in Assam were mainly labelled as foreigners in Assam and a threat to the identity of the Asamiya nationality in Assam. We are not venturing into estimating the number of foreign nationals in Assam; but we propose to look into the alleged threat of these groups to the identity of the Asamiya nationality in two chapters to follow so as to understand the depth of the problem and identity crisis experienced by the Asamiya nationality in their homeland, Assam.

**Role the Press Played**

The Asamiya bourgeois press played very significant role in building up the movement, defining its enemy within and outside, creating positive image for the leaders and supporters and negative image for the opponents and non-supporters, identification with certain groups among the Asamiyas and antipathy towards certain groups within the Asamiyas, Na-Asamiyas and non-Asamiyas. Simply put, they played the role of mouthpiece of Assam movement most of the time.

We have already noted earlier in this chapter about the role played by the press in the Assam movement. It would
be impossible on our part at this stage to analyse in details about the role played by the press because that would need an indepth study or a full dissertation. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the role that press played; therefore we would initiate a brief discussion emphasising mainly its class nature and its ideological transformation as to comprehend its role with movement. We have noted elsewhere (Hussain 1988A: 417) that Assam's press is largely owned by the high caste Asamiya bourgeoisie. For example, the powerful *Tribune* group of papers and the *Sentinel* group of papers published from Guwahati; and The *Janamhbumi* group of papers published from Jorhat are owned by high caste Asamiya bourgeoisie. And obviously, profit making is their fundamental interest. Not only the ownership but also the operators of these press largely belong to the Asamiya high castes. With the decline of high caste in the Congress, the Asamiya bourgeois press had changed their editorial approach. They started deviating from largely nationalist ideology to intras.Jent nativist ideology with strong anti-left tendencies. Of course, at the time of Janata wave in 1977-78, they responded positively to the wave as there was no visible regional party existed to represent their class interest. Earlier, a Dravida Munnettra Kazagham(DMK)
type of regional party 'Peoples Democratic Party of Assam' (PDPA) founded by a communist renegade G.S. Bhattacharyya failed to emerge as an alternative to Congress and therefore, it had no other alternative then to merge voluntarily with the Janata party. Hence, the bourgeois press had to project the Janata party as alternative. However, with the crumbling of Janata formation, they had gone in for popularising nativism which suited an ideologically bankrupt Asamiya ruling class.

It would be worthwhile to recollect that R.G. Baruah the founder-owner of the Tribune group which published, *The Assam Tribune* and *Dainik Asam* the major dailies of the region in English and Asamiya respectively, and Asamiya weekly *Asam Bani* was associated with the Congress since early thirties. He contested for a seat in the first election for Gauhati Municipal Corporation in 1974 as a Congress Candidate. Deka, Das, Lahon, Ahmed and Dutta (1987:81) observed:

Out of 29 candidates put up by Indian National Congress only 12 candidates could win the election and its hope for running the corporation shattered. It appeared that the victory of independents numbering 16 out of 34 ward councilors were going to form the corporation. R.G. Baruah resigned from the Congress in anticipation of securing the support of the independents and other non-Congress councilors who were willing to support Baruah as Mayor considering his personal image as a social worker and organizer and a patron of games and sports. Baruah defeated the Congress rival in the mayoral election. The Congress in the state took strong exception to this sudden political samersault. The government stopped giving advertisements to the Tribune group.
Gradually these papers took pro-Janata stand and later transformed their stand to pro-nativism. In our definition of Asamiya ruling class we included the owners of these press and their operators. Obviously, by their class background, they took sometimes covertly and sometimes very openly, anti left, anti-worker, anti-peasantry, anti-Na-Asamiya and anti-Non-Asamiya stand. At the time of 1983 elections to the state legislature, it played most vicious role. It was flooded with news of arrivals of Bangaladeshi Rajakaars in Assam through helicopters and rivers to attack the indigenous people and their villages. It deepened the Asamiya fear and sharpened hatred. These press avoided to take any critical position. They were mostly guided by "AASU can do no wrong" position. This was obvious, because, together with AASU and AAGSP, the Asamiya bourgeois press also played leadership role in the movement.

In addition to bourgeois press, Assam too, has small but democratic press which largely played a critical role in the Assam movement. For example Janakranti an Asamiya weekly edited by Syed Mehdi Alam Bora and later by Homen Burghain played an important role in giving expression to various view-points on the Assam movement. Burghain himself
was very critical about certain bellicous and anti-secular manifestation of the movement. Another distinguished Cambridge educated scholar, Prof. Hiren Gohain of Gauhati University whose critical opinions about the movement were either rejected or published in distorted forms by the Asamiya bourgeois press, came up with a small tabloid *Saptahik Nilachal*. Though professionally an academic, his sensitive investigative journalism brought to light many news which were either suppressed or published in distorted forms in the bourgeois press. For example, he brought to light the killing of two Bodo peasants by the Assam police in which local students leaders were also involved in the name of evicting alleged Bangladeshis from government land in North Guwahati. Prof. Gohain through his writings both in English (mainly in *Economic and Political Weekly* 1979, 1980) and Asamiya, tried to expose the chauvinism of Asamiya ultra nationalists, and weakness and mistakes committed by the leadership of the movement. Another weekly *Sadiniya Nagarik* edited by Homen Burghohain in the early stage of the movement also took democratic and secular position unlike the Asamiya bourgeois press. It should also be mentioned that these two intellectuals Gohain and Burghohain (both by birth belonged to non-caste group) had repeatedly caused embarrassment to the leadership of the movement by their
critical comments, investigative journalism and questions. On many occasions the non-bourgeois press came out with brilliant pieces of journalistic work (for an example Appendix c)

By the time it became crystal clear about the sectarian and divisive role played by the Asamiya bourgeois press, a good number of democratic and progressive individuals came together collectively to form a new cultural organization 'Gana Sanskriti Bikash Samity' and started publishing a new Asamiya weekly tabloid 'Saptahik Janajivan' under the editorship of Mrs. Nirupama Burgohain, a well known novelist and journalist.

It should be recalled that Mrs. Burgohain was forced to leave Saptahik Nilachal in early 1980 because she dared to express her resentment against treatment meted-out to the non-Asamiya victims of north Kamrup carnage. Together with Sadiniya Nagarik, Saptahik Kolakhar, Janakranti, Saptahik Janajivan played democratic and secular role. These papers lacked adequate funds, sophisticated machinery, professional organization and its resultant touch in the paper, very unlike their dominant counterparts in Assam. Several times their press was attacked, papers were burnt, bombs were planted, editors and workers were threatened; yet, they carried on their mission to strengthen democracy and secularism in Assam. Obviously, in the
face of strong resistance from these tabloids, the Asamiya bourgeois press became more and more bellicose and belligerent. Even at times, the Press Council of India had to warm the Asamiya bourgeois press (The Times of India 15.2.1981). Like society press was also divided in the wake of Assam movement.

Means For Reaching Goals : Ideal and Real

From the very beginning, the leadership of the movement and their partners in the press have been labelling the Assam movement as a Gandhian non-violent and peaceful mass movement. The issue raised by the movement was apodictically a secular one. The leadership in their various rounds of talks with the Government of India, expressed their opposition to the government's move to make distinction between Hindu refugees and Muslim infiltrators in determining citizenship qualifications on the basis of the "Immigrant (Expulsion from Assam) Act" introduced in 1950. AASU categorically described the act as religion oriented.

The act openly encouraged free flow into Assam of a particular religious community on the pretext of being victims of disturbances in East Pakistan. It can undoubtedly be said that this act was largely responsible for alarming population growth in the decade 1951-61 and 1961-71. In secular India, the Hindu
East Pakistanis were permitted to settle as refugees and the Muslim East Pakistanis were thrown out. If any previous instructions issued to serve political purpose, violated the spirit of constitution, corrections must be introduced (AASU 1983: 60).

Inspite of their known friendly relations with the RSS-BJP elements the leadership of the movement raised some very pertinent questions regarding citizenship qualifications in secular India diametrically opposite to RSS-BJP ideology. One of the prominent leaders of the movement told us that the Indian leaders have been showing communally biased concern for the Hindus of Pakistan but fail to express their responsibility for the Pakistani Muslims who were fighting against creation of Pakistan. They were forced to stay in Pakistan and not offered any chance for opting for secular India.

We have already mentioned about the Gandhian methods like satyagraha, hunger-strike, passive-resistance, squatting etc. adopted by the movement and the supporters of the movement too, they participated in remarkably disciplined manner. Many people took framed photographs of Gandhi on their chest to offer satyagarha. Most of the AASU-AAGSP offices had garlanded framed photographs of Gandhiji. From these apparent aspects, the movement used Gandhian methods to attain its goals.

However, one should approach the Gandhian or for
that matter non-Gandhian aspects, very objectively. First, we should look at the coalition of various political forces which formed the leadership of the movement. Were they all Gandhians? Can we call regional party like AJD or PLP as a Gandhian party morally fit to lead a peaceful Gandhian movement? Or can we accept AASU as a Gandhian students organization? Or can we call some of the prominent leaders of the movement like Nivaran Bora, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, ex-DIG Hiranya Bhattacharya, Bhrigu Phukan, Atul Bora, Girin Barua, Bhorat Naroh, Zoi Nath Sarma or communist renegade D.P. Barooah as Gandhians? Answers to these questions are too obvious to spell out in details. To be honest, no political formation has remained Gandhian in contemporary India. Similarly, to become individually a true Gandhian at the real political level is nearly impossible in contemporary society and politics. However, at the ideal political or cultural level any party or individual can claim to be the true follower of Gandhian ideology and praxis.

However, it must be admitted that the majority of the supporters were fundamentally peaceloving masses and a small minority among them were influenced by the idea of extremism and violence against their perceived enemies. The socialization process of the movement enabled them to situate their
enemies within and without. Accordingly, they involved in violence and started to consider it as a patriotic duty to their nationality and the motherland. Most significantly, the leadership of the movement did not try at all from the beginning to contain violence. The massive support base they built-up and the capacity for mobilization that they have shown, the way masses participated in various protest actions were enough to make the Assam movement a glorious example of mass power with peaceful means.

The peaceful simulacrum of the Assam movement eroded by several factors. That the movement took a violent turn against the leftists in Assam particularly against the Asamiya leftist. They were labelled as 'Bengalir Dalal', Dalal of Bengalis, Bodans, the traitors etc. Admittedly, in such a massive movement, there might occur some minor violence here and there; but the violence against the left was perpetual. The leadership of the movement did not show any concern for stopping such violence against their political competitors.

Then came the North Kamrup violence, the first major civilian violence against civilians in the form of systematically organized rioting against selected Na-Asamiya Muslims and Hindu Bengalis in early January 1980. We have already described the
North Kamrup pogrom(4.13). However, we would like to observe that the leadership knew well the intensity of violence and the persons involved in rioting and killings and tried to black-out the information of North Kamrup happenings. Though, the PUCL Report (1980) exposed a part of happenings, the Asamiya largely masses remained ignorant about the North Kamrup massacre. The killers of North Kamrup gone unpunished. This encouraged them for a greater offensive at a later stage, as they were successful in their first experiment.

\textit{Nellie Massacre}

With the failure of talks held in December 1982 and early January 1983, the Government of India was determined to hold elections in February 1983 to the state legislature to meet what they called 'constitutional obligations'. The leadership of the movement was also equally determined to stop the election at any cost, created an extremely explosive situation in Assam. It was not only the leadership of the movement and the Government of India had conflicting approach about holding the elections; as a result of continuous socialization of movement and its counter movement, the opinion of various social groups about boycotting or participating in the election was sharply divided. Such a situation was obviously the most fertile to
organize massacres in Assam on much larger scale than earlier massacre in North Kamrup.

On 18 February 1983 over 1200 people mostly women and children were butchered to death at Nellie about 70 KM east of Guwahati in Nagaon district. An eminent Asamiya journalist has estimated the death tolls of Nellie massacre at 3000 (Burgohain 1985). All the victims belonged to Na-Asamiya Muslim community. We have pointed out elsewhere that the Muslims of Assam including the Na-Asamiya Muslims are an inseparable part of the emerging Asamiya nationality and an active partner in building its society and history (Hussain 1987 A, 1987 B, 1988B).

The unprecedented and extremely brutalized event and even surpassed the intensity of violence that perpetrated in Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon on 16-17 September 1982. The depth of Nellie massacre is aphasic for us. Apodictically, Nellie massacre is one of the largest and severest pogrom that contemporary world has recorded recently. It has only a few parallels in the post second world war history.

A perceptive scholar observed the Nellie massacre:

Some were delighted by this killings of women and children and thought it nice that such killings take care of the
problem of descendants ............
What kind of mentality is it that can organize this kind of killings? According to an eyewitness account, a man spots children huddling in a corner trying to hide after their parents have been killed. He takes a swig from his bottle and slices up the kids in one stroke. Another person, after killing quite a few people in an intoxicated state, commits suicide by leaping into river. Many of these killers cannot sleep at night, because there, in front of their eyes, only blood and severed heads. Many are crying incessantly and cannot eat. My language appears too weak to describe the situation (Sharma 1983:60-61).

Who were the killers of Nellie? The ruling classes very intelligently labelled the Lalung/Tiwa tribals surrounding Nellie areas as the killers: Definitely, all the Lalungs were not involved in killings. Those Lalungs who were involved in killings, their roles were just like that of hangman's role in capital punishment. The powerful forces from behind had systematically prepared the ground, gave the verdict for genocide, fixed the date for execution, arranged noose and hired the hangman just to give the final touch by pulling the lever for a small reward.

The Nellie massacre, we have observed elsewhere provides a clear insights to the political scientists and sociologists particularly, that a social movement ideologically based on a secular issue may have very non-secular expressions.
A peaceful simulacrum of a movement, at times, carries within it the embryo of violence and brutalities. A social movement in India now can have two types of mutually contradictory means and goals i.e., apparent and hidden, secular and communal, peaceful and violent, Gandhian and non-Gandhian etc. simultaneously (Hussain 1989 forthcoming, JCA). On the other hand, the Nellie massacre has also proved many theorists wrong who have been very repeatedly saying that communal violence is a phenomenon of urban India. The Nellie massacre has proved that communal violence in India is no longer confined to urban India alone, but, very forcefully penetrated into rural India (Ibid).

Nellie massacre was faithfully followed by another massacre at Chaulkhowachapor in Darrang district. Again, the victims belonged to the same social group. Another massacre took place at Silapathar in Lakhimpur district where the victims were Hindu Bengalis. At Gohpur in Darrang district, in attacks and counter attacks several died. Victims were the Asamiyas and the Bado tribals. At Chamoria, several Asamiyas died in rioting. These riotings not only killed hundreds of but people also led to the destruction of properties of crores of Rupees. Those who became destitutes in the process of riotings were obviously the ordinary oppressed masses. Riotings became
very endemic just before, during and immediately after the 1983 elections to the state legislature

About 150 supporters of the movement died as a result of state violence when they tried to resist holding of elections in February 1983. Many supporters were injured in the process. The law and order machinery virtually collapsed in Assam. The police and CRPF failed to contain the rioting mobs and killers. The state violence was used mostly against the innocents. Many innocents who had nothing to do with criminal activities had to become victims of state violence and repressions. However, the killers and looters had the immunity from the state violence and they had the field day.

Bomb Explosions: A New Political Culture

It was not that society in Assam was exposed to the collective civilian violence against civilians and state violence against the innocent people; Assam for the first time experienced a new kind of violence 'bomb blasts' against selected individuals and at times aimed at selected groups as target. It would be necessary to look into this kind of violence which was very much alien to Assam's pre-movement society and history.
Table 5.1

Number of Bomb-blasts and Number of Deaths 1979-84

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of blasts</th>
<th>Number of deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Computed from newspapers and Police reports.

Between 1979-84 minimum of 471 cases of bomb blasts were reported to the police. Between 1980-84, at least 101 persons died as a result of bomb blasts at various places in Assam. It would not be possible for us to make an exhaustive study at present, however, we would like to take up a few cases for scrutiny as illustrative of the phenomena.

The most sophisticated bomb-blast took place at the office of the commissioner, Upper Assam Division at Jorhat.
on 6 April 1981, which killed its target E.S. Parthasarthy IAS, the Commissioner. The device was a pressure bomb planted under the cushion of his official chair. Parthasarthy was known as a gentle and efficient administrator and he did not identify overtly or covertly with the movement like many of his colleagues in the bureaucracy. Hence, he had to pay the price. On earlier occasion also attempt was made on his life.

On an earlier occasion, a bomb was hurled on the car of prominent Congress I leader Hiteswar Saikia. Again after becoming the Chief Minister, Hiteswar Saikia escaped yet another attempt on his life made by an engineering student, and a grand son of R.G. Baruah, the late owner of the Tribune group of papers. Constant socialization, direct or indirect, in a violent and sensitive situation over a long period of time provoked many young persons to take arms. Not only the young people were socialized to take arms, arms were made available to those who wanted it to kill their perceived enemy. As a result many individuals who either opposed or did not support the movement became the victims. Many people were killed in organized bomb blasts. The bombs carried the message very well, either support the movement or face the consequences. Series of bomb blasts terrorized many individuals and groups silently.
In addition to political workers and selected individuals, bombs were used to kill and terrorise certain groups. For example, the blast of a powerful bomb in Guwahati's Fatasil-Ambari attempted to kill individuals in group. A single blast killed 19 persons in the busy market known as Bengali dominated areas in Guwahati. A prominent journalist observed that "Blasts in Fatasil-Ambari was just a beginning, not end" (Burgohain 1982; I-2). He proved prophetic, this major blast was followed by innumerable blasts in Assam later.

After installation of Congress I Minister in 1983 following the bloody election to the legislature, when the leadership of the movement called-off agitational programme to work on rebuilding and Assam was yet to recover from the election holocaust, two powerful bombs exploded on 30 March 1983 at Bolatubazar, near Hajo, about 35 KMs away from Guwahati which killed 19 persons on the spot. The target was obviously the Muslims who were alleged to have participated in the last election.

Another bomb exploded on the No I platform of Guwahati Railway Station on 7 November 1983, which instantly killed 18 persons on the spot. However, it seems, this blast had no link with the innocent persons killed. But it was linked with
Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Assam. Through this blast, the bomb makers wanted to draw the attention of the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi and her heir apparent about their capacity to make mockery of Congress I's claim of Assam's return to normalacy and Hiteswar Saikia's capacity to run the law and order machinery efficiently. Besides, these individual and group killings, bombs were planted at the radio stations, oil-pipeline, railway tracts, rail compartments, government offices etc. In several cases, the bomb makers had to pay very high prices for their political adventure. Several persons died in explosions while making or planting the bombs wrongly. It would be inexact to assume the bomb as a weapon of killings and destruction alone; bombs were used as a means of communication.

From a careful look at the Table 5.1, it is not difficult to see the gradual growth of number of blasts. Though 1982 recorded a lower blast rate i.e., 39 compared to 81 in 1981. But the number of victims in 1982 was 4½ times larger than 1981. In 1983, when Assam experienced unprecedented crisis in the wake of election to the state legislature and curbs were imposed on the normal political activities, the number of blasts and victims increased very drastically. It
seems, such blasts have drawn more media coverage than many peaceful mass mobilization. The political culture of bomb blasts fundamentally represents the anger and the frustration of bomb makers and their patrons; and, significantly, it also reflects their lack of faith on the masses who supported the Assam movement so overwhelmingly!

*Destabilization and Defection: The Crisis of Parliamentary Politics*

The Assam movement seriously destabilized the parliamentary politics in Assam. For the first time, Assam came under the Presidential rule and never before the Assam Legislative Assembly experienced such defection. Directly or indirectly, the Assam movement led to the collapse of 4 successive state governments.

Table - 5.2

Changing Party Position In the Assam Legislative Assembly 1978-80

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>No. of legislators after 1978 election</th>
<th>No. of legislators as on 14 December 1980</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janata Party</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>30 (-23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress U</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5 (-21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress I</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>45 (+37)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2 amply demonstrates the changing party positions in the Assam Legislative Assembly within a short period of time. Needless to say the major beneficiary of
of the defection was the Congress I. It had only 8 seats after the 1978 election and its strength swelled to 45 in December 1980. Did the Congress I arrange the defection by using its money power? It seems the Congress I was not required to pay very much for engineering such massive defection. The gradual irrelevance of the Janata party both at the state and at the all India level, emergence of Mrs. Gandhi as a powerful leader once again and constant pressure from the movement, their gradual isolation from the masses and abject lack of ideological commitment, many legislators from the right wing parties jostled to the Congress I for political security. The Assam movement very significantly destabilized the state legislature and changed its composition very drastically. Defectors and were mainly from the bourgeois parties/few independents. In the process the defectors and the movement together directly or indirectly strengthened the hands of Mrs. Gandhi. The left-block composed of CPM, CPI, RCPI, SUCI, CPI(ML) resisted the onslaught of the movement and the Congress I. From the beginning till the dissolution, the left had 23 members intact. Another significant exception was PTCA. Destabilization of the state legislature represents the crisis of the bourgeois parties in the parliamentary democracy.

Despite the massive defection, the Congress I failed to
gain majority in the legislature because many legislators remained loyal to their parties from which they fought and won the election. The Congress I ministry headed by Mrs. Syeda Anowara Ta'limur was installed on 6 December 1980. Her installation was opposed by the leadership of the movement. They gave a call for total black-out of the state to register their protest. The protest action was remarkably successful, the whole city of Guwahati was plunged into darkness the day she was installed. However, her ministry collapsed on 28 June 1981. Once again Assam came under president's rule. It seems at one stage Sarat Chandra Sinha, the ex-Chief Minister of Assam succeeded in mobilizing the support of the majority. But his claim was turned down by the Governor who installed two minority Congress I governments. On 13 January 1982 get another Congress I government was installed under the leadership of K.C. Gogoi, an arch defector. But, he too, failed to seek a vote of confidence in the legislature and resigned on 19 March 1982. However, after the collapse of Gogoi's government and fourth since 1978 election, the legislature was also dissolved and Assam came under the Presidential rule for the third time since 1979.
Dissolution of the state legislature on 19 March 1982 indicated that according to the constitutional provisions Assam would go in for an election before 18 March 1983 in order to elect a new House.

Impasse: the unprecedented

The leadership of the Assam movement decided to oppose tooth and nail the decision of the Government of India to hold election for the state legislature without removing the names of the foreign nationals from the electoral rolls and their subsequent deportation. One of the leaders threatened that if the government goes ahead with election, Assam will have a blood bath. The message was clear, which the government decided to ignore. One side determined to hold election with all the state power at its disposal; the other side decided not only to boycott but also to stop the holding of election by using all means with the backing of their supporters. This created an unprecedented impasse in Assam. Not only the opinion of holding election in February 1983 differed diametrically between the Government of India and the leadership of the movement: opinion of various political parties and social groups differed significantly. The Janata party, Bhartiya Janata Party and Lok-Dal decided not to participate and oppose the election in
Assam. The Congress I, Congress U, Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and all left parties decided to participate in the election.

The government and the semi-government employees of the state which constituted a major support base of the movement decided not to cooperate in any way with the election works which forced the government to bring about 9000 personnels from outside the state to man the election. These personnels included entire new recruits to IAS and other central government services. On the opposite side, the supporters of the movement build-up an emotionally surcharged situation in the Brahmaputra valley and prepared for an all out offensive against holding election. Even in such situation 628 nominations were filed for 126 seats in the state legislature, out of which 527 remained in the field for contest. One election candidate was assassinated, supporters and relatives were kidnapped, potential voters were threatened directly or indirectly. The Government of India kept on sending para-military forces on war footing as if the state was heading for a war. In the process, a war like situation emerged in the Brahmaputra valley. The traditional peace and amity in the Brahmaputra valley was transformed into mutual distrust, hatred and hostility. A perceptive scholar observed about the situation
prevailed at Guwahati on 12-13 February 1983 just before the election:

Suddenly there is universal suspicion and everyone is full of hatred and hostility. Rumour chases rumour with lightening speed. Panbazar, a prominent center of Assam's intellectual life, fears a presumed attack from the Muslims of Hedayatpur. The people of Shantipur-Bharlamukh- Athgaon fear an attack from the Bengalis and Kacharis of Fatasil-Ambari. The pandas of Kamaikhyा are afraid that the Bengalis of Pandu-Maligaon will encircle their sacred hill and climb-up to massacre them. At the same time, the Bengalis of Pandu-Maligaon are scared of an attack from the Asamiyas of Kamaikhyा. People shout and yell and run hither and thither not only on account of real clashes and attacks but also out of sheer panic (Sharma 1985 : 59).

That was the situation on the eve of election in Guwahati, the political and cultural capital of Assam, degraded to such level. From Guwahati's situation one can very well imagine the situation that prevailed in small towns and villages in Assam. This was the situation most suitable for engineering genocide, looting and killings. All these happened throughout the Brahmaputra valley in lesser or higher degree. Assam was never before exposed to such an orgy of vicious civilian violence against civilians. We have discussed this issue of violence in little more details earlier. It is not that the only civilians were involved in violence against civilians, the state violence too became very widespread. Police firing alone killed about 150 supporters of the movement who wanted to stop
the election at any cost --------- even by sacrificing their lives. Most of them were, however, the rural youths. Neither their sophisticated counterparts in urban Assam nor any other section of the supporters of the movement suffered the way they suffered. The first and genuine martyr of the movement was too an innocent rural youth.

Now the question emerges as to why such large scale violence took place in resisting 1983 election whereas resistance to 1980 election was largely peaceful. We would like to emphasize that in the 1980 election the popular response to resistance was massive and overwhelming. The mass power made the resistance largely peaceful. However, the situation in 1983 was radically different, the support base of the movement and mass response to peaceful protest actions eroded substantially. It seems the leadership of the movement lost their faith in the masses and their power to stop the election peacefully. A sincere call and honest efforts from the leadership of the movement for a peaceful massive resistance once seen in 1980 would have taken the Assam movement to a greater height. The leadership could have avoided converting the Brahmaputra valley into an abattoir of the state and national ruling classes. Their class limitations stippled here very distinctly.
Over 1600 bridges were burnt by the supporters in order to block the roads to prevent the election personnel's entry into various constituencies (see Appendix C). Even schools which were supposed to be used as polling-station were burnt down. With all possible means the supporters of the movement desperately involved in stopping the election. Even in such grave situation the government went ahead with election. This was the time when a vehicle was not available for election candidates as all vehicles were requisitioned by the government for election duty and law and order purpose. Even the Congress I had to depend on the vehicles sent from outside the state for their electioneering in the Brahmaputra valley. Obviously, such a situation was ripe for Congress I's one sided victory in 1983 election and total abstention of opposition in the legislature.

After 1983 election, obviously, the Congress I came to power in Assam, obtaining one of India's largest ever majority 91 seats out of 109 seats for which elections were held. The elections could not be held in 17 constituencies of the state legislature and out of 14 Lok Sabha constituencies, elections could not be completed in as many as 7 constituencies.
Later on, with defection, Congress I's strength swelled to 101 in the House of 109. (For a detail study of 1983 election see Das Gupta and Guha 1985 : 843-853, also for brief account Pathak 1983 : 34-35 and Burgoain 1983 : 31-32 ; for AASU'S viewpoint see AASU 1983). This massive mandate had to pass through an abattoir and drenched in blood and brutality. Needless to say in such a situation voters turn out was low in the Brahmaputra valley.

Aftermath of 1983 Elections

Immediately after election, a new Ministry was installed under the leadership of Hiteswar Saikia who had defected from Congress U in the wake of Assam movement. He was a member in the Sinha cabinet 1972-78, Taimur cabinet 1980-81 and Gogoi cabinet 1982. He belonged to the Ahom community. He formed a broad based ministry where in largely all communities found their representation. The immediate task before the new ministry was to engage seriously in rehabilitation and relief operations to the large number of victims of the election related violence.

The leadership of the movement called off their protest actions temporarily. However, very significantly, they refused to
recognize the Saikia government and called for boycotting the government and its leaders/Ministers. They labelled the Saikia Government as 'illegal' and election as a fraud.

According to the government more than 4000 people died in Assam as a result of election related violence in 1983 (The statesman: 4 September 1984). However, the non-government reports suggested the number of deaths at more than 7000. On the other hand, the death tolls reached around 500 in all preceding the 1983 election which included deaths from police firing on the supporters of the movement, cases assassination of pro-poll political workers (Das Gupta and Guha 1985: 853). After the installation, the government reorganized the entire police force in Assam which played a very partisan role like the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) of U.P. and the Bihar Military Police (BMP) of Bihar in dealing with riots in Assam. In an investigative report Arun Shourie (1983) has shown that the police had the information about impending danger in Nellie yet the police did not take any precautionary measures to protect the innocents. Through new measure, the government succeeded in containing the collective violence against civilians in Assam. However a new kind of violence emerged more forcefully in Assam i.e. the bomb blasts after 1983 elections. This issue
we have already discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

Their failure to stop 1983 election inspite of desperat- 
efforts, emergence of a new government under the leadership of 
Hiteswar Saikia, and pathatic affects of 1983 election, frustrated 
of the leadership, another section 
a section tried to introspect their role and position in 
the movement. Break-up of AASU over the issue of presence 
and patronage of RSS-BJP elements and Nellie killings, weakened 
the leadership of the movement. Internal dissensions increased among the leadership. However, neither the issue they 
raised before the nation nor their remaining support base 
became ignorable. Therefore, they remained as a force to 
reckon with in Assam. The government realized this and again 
negotiations started after a long gap and under different 
situation.

However, after 1983 election, both the parties, 
the leadership of the movement and the Government of India 
realized the importance of not having unnecessary talks 
without doing some groundwork. So, both the parties became 
cautious about their moves. Several individuals closed 
to ruling party and the government, became the go-between 
the two parties. Even service of an Indian Council of Social 
science Research's (ICSSR) financed centre was utilized. The Centre
ostensibly organized a seminar at Chandigarh, spending very liberally to which the leaders of the movement and other academics having sympathy and connections with the movement were invited to participate actively. The go-betweens utilized the service offered by the seminar. Again, another follow-up seminar was held at the Gauhati University in which an adviser of the Prime Minister participated. While academics were reading papers in the seminar, talks were held between the leadership of the movement and the adviser of the Prime Minister. The leadership of the movement continued their informal talks with the government of India, however, they refused to recognize the state Government headed by Saikia. Whenever, they had to communicate with the government of India, they used to approach through the Governor or the Chief Secretary of Assam.

Gradually, the Saikia Government which faced social boycott very strongly, made some inroads among a section of leadership and supporters. A section of the Asamiya bourgeois press made compromise with the Saikia Government to wrest some concession. Their tune too, started changing. However, most of the leaders refused to toe the line. The impasse continued, however, serious efforts were on to find a solution. Without reaching its goal the movement became 6 years old.
Situating the Conditions and Compulsions for An Accord

The leadership faced several crisis in the career of the Assam movement last being the expulsion of its Muslim leaders who questioned the RSS - BJP nexus with the leadership which severely affected the secular credential of the leadership, erosion of their support base and mass response to peaceful protest actions. Most of the prominent student leaders realized that they could not and should not remain as student for a long period. Some of them had already completed a decade as post-graduate student. The AASU executive body and various office bearers completed 6 years in 1985, though they were elected for one year only. Within the leadership, a section questioned the justness of boycotting and opposing 1983 election. Some felt that their actions helped Congress I's easy victory. Some felt that the leadership of the movement should have participated in the election and they had a good chance of winning substantial number of seats if not the majority. Serious introspection started and as a result they moved to form a unified regional party.

It would be important to recall here that a petition was filed at the Supreme Court before 1983 election seeking to stop the election. The Supreme Court, however,
refused to intervene in the election process which had already started. Again, another petition was filed at the Supreme Court after election to declare the 1983 election as invalid and illegal. The Asamiya bourgeois press gave the impression that the Supreme Court verdict might bring down the Saikia Government. The leadership were too, very much optimistic about securing a Court judgement from the Supreme in their favour to nullify the Saikia Government. But the Supreme Court judgement had gone against their last hope of throwing the Saikia Government out of power. The judgement demoralized the leadership severely.

The emerging situation forced the leadership to seek a solution soon. However, they were in no position to accept 1971 as the cut-off year as repeatedly suggested by the Congress I and other political parties since 1979. Hence, they needed a solution other than strict 1971 as cut-off years detecting foreigners in Assam. They prepared themselves now to not to remain strict on 1961 as cut-off year.

On the other side, the Indian politics transformed radically in the wake of disturbing political developments in Punjab. Mrs. Indira Gandhi was assassinated and Rajiv Gandhi became the new Prime Minister under an extra-ordinary situation.
The country had gone in for a mid-term poll in December 1984 to elect a new Lok-Sabha. Assam was exempted from the mid-term poll. The Congress I in the wake of Mrs. Gandhi's assassination received a massive mandate ------ more than two-thirds majority and Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India as expected.

The Punjab situation created a serious problem for the Indian state and its operators ------ the Indian ruling class. Mrs. Gandhi's assassination and its aftermath represented a crisis of serious nature for the Indian ruling class. It realized the urgency for solving the Punjab tangle politically through negotiations. Inspite of massive mandate, Rajiv Gandhi experienced political insecurity. Such crisis situation forced the Government of India to sign an accord on the Punjab tangle with the Akali leadership. As a result of the Punjab accord, the Akali Dal came to power at the state through an election that followed the accord. However, the other signatory, Harcharan Singh Longwal was assassinated. Somehow, an ad-hoc arrangement was made in Punjab as a result of accord. The Punjab situation and its resultant crisis in the Indian state and the ruling class forced the Government of India to seek an immediate compromise with the leadership of 6 years.
long Assam movement. The Government of India, too became restless as the leadership of the movement to come in to a compromise to end the impasse.

The Assam Accord 1985

A Memorandum of Understanding, popularly known as Assam Accord 1985 (see the text in Appendix : F) was signed between the Government of India and the leadership of the movement in New Delhi in the early hourse of 15 August 1985. In the same morning, from the ramparts of historic Red-Fort Rajiv Gandhi, the Prime Minister, in his maiden independence day address to the nation, declared his another great achievement an accord with the leadership and end of 6 years long Assam movement. The bourgeois press both at the national level and the historic. All political parties welcomed the accord. In Assam, the supporters celebrated the signing of accord as a great achievement of the 6 year long movement. It seems the leadership of the movement signed the accord with great hesitation and confusion. After signing the accord, they stayed back in Delhi for several days watching carefully the reactions of people in Assam. Their collaborator press, welcomed the accord, their supporters came to the street in large number hailing the accord. They shouted many slogans hailing their leaders and the accord. A very significant slogan was "Rajiv Gandhi Zindabad, Hiteswar Saikia Murdabad". This obviously represented their hate for
Hiteswar Saikia and love for Rajiv Gandhi though both of them belonged to the same political party.

Both the parties arrived at a mutually acceptable cut-off year for detecting foreign nationals in Assam. 1966 was accepted as the cut-off year for detecting foreigners and 1971 as cut-off year for deporting the foreign nationals from Assam/India. Those who entered Assam between 1 January 1966 and 24 March 1971 will be detected, allowed to stay in Assam and disfranchised for 10 years; after which they will be given back their right to vote once again. Those entered from across the international border after 24 March 1971 will be deported. Besides, the Government of India agreed to offer constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguard to protect, preserve and promote the culture, social, linguistic and heritage of the Assamese people. In addition to increasing patrolling by security forces on land and riverine routes all along the international border, the Government of India committed to prevent future infiltration by erection of physical barrier like walls, barbed-wire fencing etc.

The leadership of the movement agreed to call-off their 6 year long movement and assured full cooperation and
dedicate themselves towards the development of the country. From the Government of India side, it agreed to withdraw the cases of disciplinary action taken against employees for their participation in the movement, relaxed the age limit of candidates from Assam for all UPSC conducted examination, etc. In addition to these, the Government of India agreed to set-up a new Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and a refinery in the private sector in Assam. The Government of India agreed to request the Election Commission to ensure preparation of a fair electoral rolls. Officially, these were the major provisions of the Assam accord 1985.

The leadership of the movement at the beginning demanded 1951 as cut-off year for detecting and deporting the foreign nationals, however, after 6 years of movement, they practically came to accept 1971 for all practical purpose which all other political parties were advocating since late 1979. However, the decision to allow to stay in Assam, the entrants of 1966-71 and to defranchise them for 10 years and again to give them the voting rights after the gap of 10 years represented apparently most complex-contradictory decision. Gola Borbora (1988; 44-45) the ex Chief Minister of Assam, has pointed out that the provisions related to the foreigners
of 1966-71 has been unnecessarily delaying and complicating the process of indentification of foreigners in Assam. This provision according to him was devised only to save the faces of the leadership of the Assam movement, who had constantly refusing and demanded earlier 1951 as the cut-off year.

In addition to the official accord there was certain non-official understanding between the Prime Minister and the leadership of the movement. The leadership wanted the dismissal of Hiteswar Saikia government which was to be followed by an election to the state legislature. Rajiv Gandhi instead agreed to dissolve the state legislature and to allow the Saikia Government to function as the caretaker government till the alternative arrangements were made. Ultimately, the leadership accepted this provision, as per instruction of the Rajiv Gandhi, the Prime Minister and the President of the Congress I party, Hiteswar Saikia advised the Governor to dissolve the legislature and order a fresh poll. Accordingly, Hiteswar Saikia led the caretaker government till the 1985 election. After the election, he became the leader of the opposition.

Aftermath of the Accord 1985

After the accord was signed certain important development took place in Assam. The AASU part of the leadership took initiative to form a regional party in Assam with the help
of the supporters of the Assam movement. AASU had already organized two conventions first at the Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat and the second at the Gauhati University, Guwahati to prepare ground for forming a regional political party. A new political party known as Asam Gana Parishad (AGP) was formed on 14 October 1985, with Prafulla Kumar Mahanta as the Chief President of the Presidium. Before forming the party, the prominent leaders officially left AASU and joined the AGP. AASU once again declared its commitment to remain apolitical. AASU formed a new executive body with new office bearers after a gap of more than six years. Two regional parties AJD and PLP also merged with the new political party. The new regional party declared itself a "regional party with a rational outlook" (for objective of the party see Appendix G). And obviously, the new party prepared itself for election to be held in December 1985.

Though there were elder elements from PLP and AJD in the newly formed unified regional party, it was the ex-AASU leaders stolen the thunder from the elder generation. They played most dominant role in the new party. Most of the ex-AASU leaders were either post-graduates or graduates. They largely belonged to the urban middle class and the rural gentry. Along with them
some lumpen elements too joined the AGP. The departure of most of the over-aged student leaders from AASU paved the way for younger elements to take over the AASU leadership. Here, it should be admitted that the strength of AGP fundamentally depended on the workers and the organizations of the AASU.

In 1985 election it became very difficult to distinguish between the AGP & AASU. It was fundamentally the AASU workers who tirelessly worked for the victory of the AGP.

When the leadership of the Assam movement formed AGP, the leaders and the supporters of the counter movement formed United Minorities Front (UMF) with Kalipada Sen as the President, to politically counter the AGP in Assam. They felt let down by the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress I, when they agreed 1966 as the cut-off year for detecting foreign nationals and disfranchisement of entrants of 1966-71 for 10 years. They felt betrayed by the Congress I which repeatedly committed itself to 1971 as cut-off year till Mrs. Gandhi was alive. The support base of the UMF confined to the Hindu Bengalis and Na-Asamiya Muslims of the Brahmaputra valley. Most of its leaders were ex-Congressmen, ex-Janata member and AAMSU activists. Their main electoral plank was opposition to the Assam accord which they felt would ultimately go against the interest of the religious and linguistic minorities living in Assam.
Significantly, the UMF failed to penetrate into the predominantly Bengali speaking Barak valley. Even, a very prominent leader of the UMF from the Barak valley had to fight the election from a Brahmaputra valley constituency.

AGP participated in the election to the state legislature and secured 64 seats in the House of 126. It also received support from 7 independents, raising its strength to 71. It secured 35.17% of the total votes polled in the election. The AGP candidates also won 7 out of 14 Lok-Sabha seats. AGP formed the state government. The success of AGP very paradoxically falsified the major ideological assumption that the Asamiyos are losing their political identity. Without any base in the Barak valley and hill areas of Assam, AGP came into power with its base confined to the Brahmaputra valley alone. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, the most prominent student leader of the movement became the Chief Minister as expected. His colleagues became Ministers, MLAs and chairmen of various autonomous bodies.

The Congress I which had 101 seat in the last House of 109 secured only 23 seats. However, in the last normal election, i.e. 1978 election, the Congress I won only
8 seats, ------ again in the normal election, 1985, it won 23 seat. From that comparison the Congress I has gained substantially. But if we compare their performance with the 1983 election which was neither fair nor popular, it has lost substantially. It seems the way Congress I fought the election in 1985, it was determined to allow the AGP to get at least the simple majority and form a government in Assam. The pro-movement AGP formed the government and significantly the pro-counter movement UMF became the second largest group with 17 members in the House. The Janata party was totally wiped-out, so also the BJP. The left parties which had won 23 seats in the 1978 election, failed to offer any significant fight in the electoral battle. Only two CPM members won the election. The Assam movement severely affected their growing support base.

It must be pointed out that the new AGP Ministry failed to provide adequate representation to all major social groups in Assam. The Hindu Bengalis of both Brahmaputra and Barak valleys found no representation in the AGP government. The Na-Asamiya Muslims too remained absolutely unrepresented. However, an Asamiya Muslim was appointed as a Minister of
State for a brief period. It would be pertinent to recollect that the Muslims account for 1/3 of the entire Asamiya population. Except, the high caste Asamiyas, all other sections of the Asamiya nationality were either underrepresented or not represented at all in the government. An angry tribal MLA (Basumatary 1988:4) pointed out that the AGP had 5 cabinet Ministers out of 6 Asamiya Brahmin MLAs, 18 out of 21 Asamiya high caste MLAs became Ministers whereas only 4 Ministers were chosen from 18 scheduled tribe MLAs. It is not at all difficult to observe the excessive representation of high caste Asamiya in the new government. The Government neither reflected the social groups of Assam nor various groups within the Asamiya nationality itself. This fundamentally reflects the narrow social base of the party. It also depicts the major beneficiaries of the Assam movement. The way Congress failed in the wake of Assam movement, the AGP too failed similarly in the wake of tribal movements in Assam. Not only the social base of the government but also the social base of the party largely remained narrow. In fact, the task of party building remained weak and incomplete. As the narrow base of the AGP government and the party has become distinctly visible, many supporters have left the party out of frustration. Not only most of the party members, even many important leaders are
not sure about the future of the party. Such uncertainties added by lack of ideological commitment has made the party weak, government inefficient and highly corrupt. Infact, the AGP has spoiled the chance of building-up a healthy secular-nationalistic and democratic regional party in Assam. Within a very short period of time, the AGP has remarkably proved like Janata to be the instable inheritor of the redundant part of the Congress culture. It has also demonstrated in no uncertain terms the weaknesses and the vices of a right wing regional bourgeois party in our parliamentary democracy.

The major demand of the Assam movement was to detect the foreigners, delete their names from the electoral rolls and deport them from Assam/India. Initially, it wanted 1951 to be the cut-off year, however, for all practical purpose 1971 became the cut-off year. The process of detection of foreign nationals in Assam has been extremely slow. Even after completion of its three years in office, the AGP Government even could not deport 1000 foreigners. It should be recalled that in mid-sixties the Congress government deported 1 lakh 93 thousand foreigners from Assam. Even during 1½ years of Janata rule in Assam, during the first year itself it detected and deported 8000 Bangladeshi nationals from Assam (Borbora 1988: 56). Besies, borders are as
precarious as it was before 1985 accord. The Assam accord assured to provide certain constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguard to protect and preserve the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people. This part of the accord has not yet progressed at all. This part has also a serious implication, if the definition of the Assamese is not wide enough to cover the entire nationality, it would help only its ruling class exclusively. Besides no substantial progress has been made for starting the proposed refinery and the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Assam. The only progress that the Assam accord has made is the withdrawal of cases of suspensions, dismissals of the government employees and providing relaxation of age-limit for jobs. Additionally, the government has made ex-gratia payments to the families of victims of the Assam movement. The accord has not made substantial progress in major issues like detecting and deporting foreign nationals, protecting the international border from further influx.

However, the non-official accord, the real understanding between the Indian ruling class and the Asamiya ruling class has been implemented effectively. The Indian ruling class has given relative autonomy and certain concession to the
Asamiya ruling class to run the state and to plunder it accordingly. Therefore, the Assam movement has reached its goals or not may be important to the Asamiya masses who supported the movement out of their patriotic urge, but not for their ruling class as long as they can exert their hegemony over the whole society in Assam and plunder the state to the maximum. The leadership of the Assam movement had shown tremendous power to mobilize the Asamiya masses and build-up pressure through various means; therefore, it was not possible for the Indian ruling class to ignore to buy peace in Assam without giving certain concessions to the Asamiya ruling class. But has the peace come back to Assam? More than 80 political assassinations took place in Assam after AGP came to power besides, another mass movement with violent manifestations emerged. Appeasing a particular faction or a set of factions of the Asamiya ruling class has its own vicious limitation. Dissatisfaction from other deprived elements of the uneven and heterogeneous Asamiya ruling class has surfaced very forcefully. They have become restive when they see the set of high caste factions of the Asamiya ruling class monopolizing whatever is available in an economically backward state. Now every social group in Assam has its own faction, weak or strong, in the ruling
class. Equation of these factions keep on changing with the changes in political equation. Simply put, the inter factional or intra-ruling class competition and conflict at the present stage of development play a very significant role. This, we can see from the emergence of powerful movement among the tribals in Assam both in the hills and the plains. The Assem movement has become their reference group/movement. At present, a set of factions representing the high castes are dominating the Asamiya ruling class, and obviously it has its own contradictions and antithesis—internal and external. The nature of resolution of such contradictions would determine their position in Assam and their operational relations with the Indian ruling class. The Indian ruling class would take the advantage of intra-class competitions and conflicts of the Asamiya ruling class. So also, the Asamiya ruling class would take the advantage of the same of the Indian ruling class.

The Assam movement has shown how the ruling classes both at the state level and all India level determine the nature and direction of contemporary social movement apparently led by the middle class leadership. The Assam movement inspite of its massive mobilization would find it near impossible to reach
its apparent goal because its middle class leadership is entrapped in the domain of two ruling classes. The leaders have reached their goals—the seat of power; but not the masses. After all the leaders did not do their politics to lead the masses to a concrete goal. They took up an issue, justified it, distorted it, contradicted it, created illusions through their designers in the press. They successfully attained political power at the state level. Simply put, they got what they wanted. The masses are standing with the burden of accumulated underdevelopment, deceived and frustrated.

The emergence of the AGP as a ruling party with movement leaders leading the state government, one can safely assume the institutionalization of Assam movement. The Assam movement, became a part of the establishment. What changes we see after AGP came to power in Assam? The boys who had repeatedly given calls for boycotting the Republic days and the Independence days during the career of the Assam movement, started hoisting national flags on Independence and Republic days. This is a very significant gain of the Assam accord. The bomb makers stopped making bombs and blasting them. The state as well civilian restrictions on
on normal political activities virtually stopped. Political activities started afresh after the accord. The masses came out to listen the leaders, participated in large number in the election. These were the major gains for the society. AGP'S entry had changed the complexion of the legislature. Most of its MLAs were either graduates or post-graduates. The entry of youthful leaders reduced the average age of the members of the legislature substantially. The young ministers gave freshness to the state secretariat. They became a part of the old establishment. Though the party which came to taste the power was new, the leaders who operated the state machinery were young in age, but they had to accept the hard reality of operating within the same old institutions. Because of their severe class limitations, they failed to create new institutions or change tangibly the nature of the old institutions build by the Raj and the Congress over a long period of time. The new young leadership proved too weak before the old institutions. They neither could create new institutions nor could alter the nature of old institutions; rather, they lugubriously allowed the old institutions to accommodate them to the status-quoist position. In the process, the AGP failed to bring about any
tangible change in the functioning of the government. It became no less corrupt than the earlier Congress or Janata regime, because it was forced to operate within the boundaries of the old institutions.

Is the position of the movement leaders in the establishment well-entrenched? It is a difficult question to answer at this juncture. But from the indicators of political development in Assam, it is not at all difficult to say that their position is unstable. It may change depending on its equation with the deprived faction of the Asamiya ruling class on one hand, and, the Indian ruling class on the other. Drastic change in the equation might cause dislocation these leaders. Such change is after all a part political culture of all bourgeois parties in India -- regional or national.

Summing up

Our survey of the Assam movement from incipiency to its uncertain and instable institutionalization has helped us to understand the internal dynamics of a contemporary social movement. The high caste dominated Asamiya middle class played an important role in providing an ideology and organization to build-up the edifice of the movement. The issue was presented
in such a way that it caught the imagination of the people for whom it was meant. The leadership meanwhile transformed the ideology and organization to be capable of leading a movement backed by the state ruling class. The Asamiya masses provided unprecedented support to the movement. Massive mobilization took place throughout the Brahmaputra valley. By November 1979, the Assam movement reached its peak of mobilization and very successfully continued its peak till the mid of 1980. After that, it had shown the sign of gradual tiredness and slow erosion of its support base and response to protest actions. The popular protest action like Satyagraha, mass squatting, procession etc. increasingly replaced by bandhs, Janata curfew, black-outs, non-cooperation etc. The Assam movement achieved its remarkable success in stopping the election of January 1980 which had shown the power of the masses. However, the entire society in Assam was gradually exposed to unprecedented violence, both state and civilian. Both, the state and the leadership of the movement failed to contain the belligerence penetration of violence. The leadership of the movement changed its cut-off year. The movement had destabilized the parliamentary politics of the state. In the wake of Assam movement 4 state governments collapsed and Assam experienced 3 spells of Presidential rules. The
Assam movement received tremendous support from the Asamiya bourgeois press which virtually became its mouthpiece. Like many powerful social movements, the Assam movement also propelled a significant counter movement. Besides, it had a strong anti-left tendency both in its ideology and praxis. An unprecedented impasse emerged when the Government of India ordered for an election to the state legislature and the leadership of the movement decided to oppose it by all means. Election was held in only 109 constituencies out of 126 constituencies. It was mared by unprecedented violence comparable to few worst in the contemporary world. A new Congress I government came into power at the state level and the leadership of the movement refused to recognize it. However, because of certain compulsions both the leadership and the Government of India came into an understanding which resulted in the Assam accord. As a result, a new regional political party AGP was formed which was voted to power in December 1985. The apparent goals of the movement are yet to be reached, but the hidden goals of the leadership have been acheived.