CHAPTER-1

THE STATE OF ASSAM

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

The state of Assam is the sentinel of north-east India and the gateway to north-eastern states with diverse population. It occupies a strategic position in the political map of India. It is the biggest state of India in the north-east region and has some common borders with neighboring countries. To its north lies the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan, the state of Manipur and Nagaland are on the east; Meghalaya and Mizoram to the south and to the west are Bangladesh and the Indian state of Tripura. Except for a narrow corridor running through the foothills of the Himalayas that connects the state with West Bengal, Assam is almost entirely isolated from India. In between, it has a common border with Bangladesh and Burma. The capital of Assam used to be Shillong in the modern state of Meghalaya for more than a hundred years until it was moved to Dispur, a suburb of Guwahati in 1972, after Meghalaya became a separate state of India.

The present state of Assam is situated between twenty-four and twenty-eight degrees north latitude and eighty-nine and ninety-seven degrees east longitude. The alluvium of the Brahmaputra or Assam-proper, extended at the
beginning of our period from the river Manati-Manah on the north bank of Brahmaputra to the foot of the Himalayas close to the frontier of China. With the 'Tropical Monsoon Rainforest Climate', Assam is a temperate region and experiences heavy rainfall and high humidity. Winter lasts from late October to late February. The minimum temperature is 6 to 8 degrees Celsius. Nights and early mornings are foggy, and rain is scanty. Summer starts in mid May, accompanied by high humidity and rainfall. The maximum temperature is 35 to 38 degrees Celsius, but the frequent rain reduces this. The peak of the monsoons is during June. Spring and Autumn with moderate temperatures and modest rainfall are the most comfortable seasons.

Assam is one of the richest biodiversity zone in the world. There are number of tropical rainforests in Assam. Moreover, there are riverine grasslands, bamboo orchards and numerous wetland ecosystems. Many of these areas have been protected by developing national parks and reserved forests. The Kaziranga and Manas are the two World Heritage Sites. The Kaziranga is the home for the rare Indian Rhinoceros, while Manas is a tiger sanctuary. Moreover, there are numerous other valuable and rare wildlife and plant species available in Assam. Few of the rarest species are the Golden Languor (Chloropsis cochin chinensis), the White-winged Wood Duck or Deuhnah (Cairina scultulata), the Golden Cat, etc. The Hillock Gibbon in Assam is the only ape found in South Asia.

Assam is the leader of north–east and crucial in many ways. The state comprises an area of 78,523 square kilometers (30,318 square miles) of which
hills account for twenty\(20\%\) percent. Assam has a population of more than 26 millions (26,638,407) with a density of 340 person per square kilometer. It is known for rich forest wealth with verities of flora and fauna. The state has plenty of rainfall, rich alluvial soil, large forest, minerals including immense water resources, which also accounts for a high hydro-electric potential. Assam is endowed with petroleum, natural gas, coal, limestone and many other minor minerals such as magnetic quartzite, kaolin, sillimanites, clay and feldspar. A small quantity of iron ore is also available in western parts of Assam.

The Upper Assam districts are the major reserves of oil and gas. Petroleum was discovered in Assam in 1889. It is estimated that Assam and surrounding region possess around 150 million tones of petroleum reserves. Some 5.4 million tones of crude oils are produced from Assam’s oil wells, which at one time were the only source of oil in India. Despite the richness of natural resources the state has not made headway in industrialization and general economic development because of frequent occurrence of floods, inadequate development of communications which increases the dependence on agriculture and keep Assam at the stage of rural dominance with an urban population of about twenty\(20\%\) percent. There are 21,995 inhabited villages and the number of uninhabited villages is 1,106; there are 72 towns and around 35 Mahkuma Parishads and 135 development blocks. The major rivers of Assam are --the Brahmaputra, Kopil, Barak, Manah and Aie.
Modern Assam has 27 districts, which are akin to counties in the US or the UK. Except for the districts of Karbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills, and the newly formed district Udalguri [2006] Assam is generally composed of plains and river valleys. Today, the state can be divided into three principal geographical regions:

(a) The Brahmaputra Valley is composed of northern districts of the state and situated on the river bank of Brahmaputra,
(b) Barak Valley consists of southern districts belonging to river Barak and
(c) Mikir (Karbi Anglong), and North-Cachar the entirely hilly districts that divide the two regions

Bodoland is an area located in the north bank of Brahmaputra river in the state of Assam, by the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh; inhabited predominantly by Bodo language speaking ethnic group. Presently, the map of Bodoland includes the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) administered by an autonomous Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The map of Bodoland overlaps with the districts of Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang and Udalguri in state of Assam. At present, Kokrajhar town serves as the headquarter (capital) of Bodoland. The BTC has 12 electorate members each looking after a specific area of control called Somisthi. The area under the BTC jurisdiction is called the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAC), a territorial privilege established according to the Memorandum of Settlement of February 10, 2003. BTC was announced to be formed just after the BLTF surrenders. The BLTF laid down their weapons in December 6, 2003 under the leadership of Hagrama Mohilary.
who was sworn in as the Chief Executive Member (CEM) on December 7, 2003. The four contiguous districts of the BTAC (—i.e., Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri and Chirang) were carved out of eight existing districts—Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang and Sonitpur—an area of 27,100 km (35% of Assam). That the BTAC is created under the sixth schedule of the Constitution of India has been opposed by some organizations.9

Assam, proper means the Brahmaputra valley. The Brahmaputra is the only river in the world having a masculine name [the son of Brahma, the creator] . It is the dominant factor in the region. It rises from Tsagpo in Tibet and flows to Assam through the territory of Arunachal Pradesh and flows through the east to west traversing a distance of 805 Kilometres. From Assam, it enters into Bangladesh and ultimately meets the Bay of Bengal. It is said that what the Gangatic valley is to the history of north India, the Brahmaputra valley is to the history of Assam. All ancient kingdoms of Assam arose in this valley. The Assamese speaking regions mostly lie in the Brahmaputra Valley; while Barak Valley is dominated by Bengali speaking people.

Before going into detail about the population, culture and the social structure of Assam, it is necessary to discuss briefly about the geographical situation of various districts of the state. Physically, the greater part of Bongaigaon district is a level plain and is derived by river Brahmaputra. Chirang is the name of the new district formed in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)
area of Assam. Chirang is also an old spelling for the Tsirang district of Bhutan. Chirang has been carved from the Bongaigaon District of Assam and is 80% inhabited by Bodo people and rest 20% are occupied by others, mostly the immigrants from Bangladesh.

The district of Barpeta falls roughly into three natural divisions namely—the tract near the Brahmaputra, the central plain and the Cachari Duars near the Bhutan hills. The Darrang district is 40 km away from Brahmaputra and forestry occupies a greater part of it. The northern high land of the western tract of the district is inhabited mainly by the Kacharis and Nepalese. Dhemaji district is situated at the head of Assam Valley girt on the north and east by the Himalayas, thickly wooded from the base to the snow line and on the north banks of Brahmaputra, a intensively to the foot of hills presenting a diversified scene. In Dhubri district, there are several low ranges projecting from the Garo hills, which reach right to the river Brahmaputra.

**Udalguri** is a town and a town area committee and a District in the Indian state of Assam. Earlier, it was a sub-division in Darrang District. But after Signing of Bodo Accord to end the demand for a Separate Bodoland State, An Autonomous District called BTAD (Bodoland Autonomous Area District) was created and Udalguri is now one of Four Districts under BTAD. Udalguri had a population of 14,893. Males constitute 52% of the population and females 48%. Udalguri has an average literacy rate of 74%, higher than the national average of
59.5%: male literacy is 80%, and female literacy is 67%. In Udalguri, 12% of the population is under 6 years of age.

The district of Dibrugarh is situated at the head of Brahmaputra Valley, having a broad plain. The Goalpara district is always been subjected to earthquakes. The district of Golaghat is covered with reed jungles and is world famous for rhinocerous. The Jorhat district is drained by Brahmaputra where lies the greatest river-island of the world ‘Majuli.’ The Kamrup district is divided by Brahmaputra. Kamakhya Hills is the most beautiful hill in the district. Similarly, the district of Marigaon, Nagaon, Nalbari, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Kokrajhar, Sibsagar and Tinsukia are situated on the Brahmaputra Valley. Tinsukia is physically both picturesque and is surrounded by dense evergreen hills. The northern side of the district is bounded by Blue Hills.

The North Cachar district is a completely hilly area and is very picturesque. The Karbi –Anglong is covered by hills, save for narrow strips of flat lands on the border along the banks of a few rivers. The district of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj are situated on the river bank of Barak and is dominated by Bengali speaking people. This Valley is also a mixture of hills and plains. These three districts are extremely picturesque. The districts of Karimganj and Cachar have also a common border with Bangladesh.
ASSAM AT A GLANCE

BASIC STATISTICS OF ASSAM

1. Geographical Area: 78438 sq. km. (of this 20% hilly)

2. Administrative Division:
   (A) Districts: 27 nos.
   (B) Blocks: 219 nos.
   (C) Mahakuma Parishad: 43
   (D) Gaon Panchayat: 2489 nos.
   (E) Total villages: 25590 nos.

3. Population – (2001 Census Provisional as per census of India):
   (A) Total : 26638,407 nos.
   (B) Male: 13787,799 nos.
   (C) Female: 12850,608 nos.
   (D) Rural population (1991 census): 19926527 nos. (88.90%)
   (E) Urban population (1991 census): 2487759 nos. (11.10%)
   (F) Decadal growth rate Of: 53.26% population (1991-2001)
   (G) Density of population : 340 per sq. km. (India 324 per sq. km.)

4. Literacy Rate :
   (A) Total percentage : 64.28%
   (B) Rural percentage : 49.32%(1991 census)

RURAL POVERTY (as per BPL census 1998)
   (i) Total rural families:34,12,506
   (ii) Total BPL families in rural areas : 20,28,058 – SC: 2,59,316- ST: 4,28,337
   (iii) Percentage of BPL families in rural areas : 59.43%
   (iv) Geographical distribution of poverty
      (a) Highest PC of BPL families in the state : Goalpara (75.25%)
      (b) Next Highest: Dhubri (75.03%)
      (c) Lowest PC of BPL families in the state : Jorhat (41.00%) & Tinsukia (41.31%)

Agriculture Statistics (1998-99)
1. Land utilisation in hectares :
   (A)Total geographical Area : 7843800
   (B)Total cropped Area :3988600
   (C)Cultivable wasteland : 80194
   (D)Area under Forest : 235798
   (E)Land put to Non-agriculture :1030378 uses
   (F)Grazing land :158480
   (G)Net Area sown : 2701053 (35.40% of geographical area)
   (H)Area sowed more than once :1215195 *Excluding Karbi Anglong & N. C. Hills
District Map of Assam

BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH

The history of Assam is as colourful as the land itself. The state has long been known to Indian mythology. Its history and has always been part and parcel of the Indian consciousness. In the ancient period, Assam was known as "Prag-Jotisha" or the place of eastern astronomy. Another name of the state mentioned in Indian scriptures, mythologies and political works as "Kamrupa." In the modern days the state came to be known as "Assam" when the mighty Ahoms took over the administration of the land in 1228. Assam and adjoining regions have evidence of human settlement from all periods of the Stone ages. The hills settlements belonged to earlier periods may suggest that the valleys were populated later, or it may reflect sampling bias due to mountainous areas being more likely to remain less disturbed over long stretches of time.

Human inhabitation of this area dates backs to about 2000 BC. The population of Assam comprises of the migrants from Burma and China. They came to Assam after the mongoloid migration. They came from Punjab through Bihar and North Bengal. Thus, Assam presents a fusion of Mongol-Aryan culture. The earliest ruler according to legend was Mahiranga (Sanskritised form of the Tibeto-Burman name Mairang). He was followed by others in his line: Hatak, Sambar, Ratna and Ghatak. Naraka removed this line of rulers and established his own dynasty. The Naraka king mentioned at various places in Kalika Purana, Mahabharata and Ramayana covering a wide period were probably different rulers from the same dynasty. Kalika Purana, a Sanskrit text compiled in Assam in
the 9th and 10th century, mentions that the last of the Naraka-bhauma rulers, Naraka, was slain by Krishna. His son Bhagadatta, mentioned in the Mahabharata, fought for the Kauravas in the battle of Kurushetra with an army of Kiratas, Chinas and dwellers of the eastern coast. Later rulers of Kamrupa frequently drew their lineage from the Naraka rulers.

The early history of Assam is obscure, though there are numerous references in the Mahabharata, the Puranas, and the Tantras to a great kingdom known as Kamrup that encompassed the Brahmaputra Valley, Bhutan, Cooch Behar, and the Rangpur region in eastern Bengal. The legendary king Narakasura, whose son Bhagadatta distinguished himself in the Mahabharata war, ruled Kamrupa from his capital at Pragjyotishpura, the site of a famous temple dedicated to the Tantric goddess Kamakhya, near modern Guwahati.

Among the early sources of the history of Assam are the writings of the Chinese pilgrim Yuanzang (Hiuen-tsang), who in 640 AD, attended the court of King Bhaskar Barman, an ally of the great Gupta monarch Harsha Vardhana of Northern India. Stone and copper inscriptions dating from the seventh to the twelfth century indicate a succession of Hindu dynasties, but it is unclear as to what extent the indigenous population of Kamrupa had embraced Hinduism beyond the royal patronage of Brahmans.

On the eve of the movement of the Ahoms to Assam in the early thirteenth century, any semblance of a centralized kingship in the region had collapsed into a
fragmented system of tribal polities and loose confederacies of petty Hindu
Rajaas, called Bhuyans. The Ahom, a Shan tribe from which the name Assam is
probably derived, crossed the Patkoi Mountains from Burma in 1228 AD and by
the sixteenth century had absorbed the Chutiya and Kachari kingdoms of the
upper Brahmaputra, subdued the neighboring hill tribes, and integrated the
Bhuyans into the administrative apparatus of a feudalistic state.

During the latter part of the sixteenth and much of the seventeenth
centuries, the Ahom repulsed a succession of Mughal invasions of their territory
from Bengal as they moved to annex the eastern portion of the powerful Koch
kingdom (1682) and to consolidate their rule over the entire Brahmaputra Valley.
The kingdom of the Ahom reached its height under Rudra Singha (1696-1714),
the renowned military strategist and patron of the Buranji, or Ahom chronicles.
Rudra Singha established extensive trade with Tibet and built the great city of
Rangpur.

In the latter half of the sixteenth century, the revered Gossain (teacher,
saint) and Assamese cultural hero, Shankara Deva, inspired a popular
Vaishnavite movement that sought to reform the esoteric practices of Tantric
Hinduism and to limit the prerogatives of the Brahmans attached to the Ahom
court. The Ahom came to sponsor an extensive network of Vaishnavite
monasteries, whose monks played an important role in the reclamation of
wastelands for wet-rice cultivation throughout the Brahmaputra Valley. Because
of the repudiation of caste privilege, Shankara Deva's Vaishnavism appealed to
the broad tribal base on which the Ahom had erected their state. From 1769, disaffected population of the kingdom, under the leadership of their "Mahanta's" (religious leaders), took part in a series of uprisings against Ahom rule that devastated upper Assam. The leader of the first uprising was Ragha Maran. His two wives Radha and Rukmini also participated in the battles against the royal army. After their victory, Ragha's son Ramakata became the king and Ragha became the Barbarua. Rivalry among the Ahom princes weakened the Ahom administration. When the situation was critical, the Governor General of British India dispatched a mission to Rangpur, the Ahom capital, at the request of King Gaurinath Xingha (reign, 1780-1795). Thus, the British restored peace in the kingdom and returned to Calcutta. But later on, the rival Barphukan (Governor), Badan Chandra, invited the Burmese to fight against the king in 1817. The Burmese swept over the country three times bringing destructions and misery. However, at the request of King Purander Singha the British drove out the Burmese invaders.

Ahom palace intrigue, and political turmoil due to the Moamoria rebellion, aided the expansionist Burmese ruler of Ava to invade Assam and install a puppet king in 1821. The Burmese, who came at the invitation of the Bar-Phukan (Governor) Badan Chandra who conspired against the king, killed one in three people in Assam over a period of five years. When the Burmese reached the doorsteps of the East India Company's borders, the First Anglo-Burmese War ensued, in which Assam was one of the sectors. The war ended with the Treaty of
Yandaboo in 1826, which saw the East India Company take control of the Lower Assam and install Purander Singh as king of an independent Upper Assam in 1833. This arrangement only lasted until 1838 when the British annexed most of independent Assam, annexing the remainder the following year. Subsequently, in 1838, all of North-East India including Assam became part of the Bengal Presidency of British India.

The British Rule

During the initial periods, a British Agent administered the devastated area of Assam when it was incorporated into the Bengal Presidency (i.e., in 1838). By 1842, the entire Assam valley has come under British rule. In 1874, a separate province of Assam including the Sylhet district (now in Bangladesh) and the Cachar district were created and administered by a Chief Commissioner with its capital at Shillong. The people of Sylhet protested the merger with Assam on the grounds of cultural identity and historic association with Bengal, and that Sylhet—the Golden—Calf—was being sacrificed for a new idol called the province of Assam. However, the Viceroy did not concede to the protestors.

Although under the British administration, Assam was a part of Bengal Presidency with its capital at Calcutta yet, sometime about 1905-1912, on the initiative of the British Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, it was separated and with parts of Bengal, a separate province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was established, with Dhaka as the capital. Rapid steps were then undertaken to develop the region for agricultural and commercial revenues. The British
dismantled the Ahom ruling structure, made Bengali the official language, and staffed administrative and professional positions with educated Bengali Hindus. Coal, limestone, and iron mines were opened and the government offered incentives to European entrepreneurs to start plantations for the production of rubber, cinchona (from which quinine is derived), hemp, jute, and most importantly, tea. Because the native population of Assam was economically well-off and hence, unwilling to do plantation labour, the British developed an extensive system of contract labor that recruited impoverished tribals from southern Bihar, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh (current states). By the turn of the century, more than one-half million of these "coolies" were employed on 700 plantations producing 145 million pounds of tea annually.

In 1912, the partition was nullified, and Assam was made a separate province once more. Early in the twentieth century, the government of India made vast tracts of land available to predominantly Muslim farmers from the provinces of East Bengal for settlement and cultivation. Nepalese were employed as dairy herders and similarly encouraged to colonize new lands. The subsequent immigration of Indian traders, merchants and small-scale industrialists, such as Marwaris and Sikhs, stimulated capital development in Assam and strengthened its ties to India. As a result of this enormous influx of migrants, Assam has been the fastest-growing region of the Indian sub-continent throughout the twentieth century. It has transformed the ethnic composition of the state and gradually diminished the political and economic prerogatives of the native Assamese. As a
result, ethnicity and migration have become prominent issues in Assamese politics.

**Assamese in the Freedom Movement:** The people of Assam remarkably contributed to the Indian struggle for independence. In the beginning, they welcomed the British with open arms because they were seen as saviour. The Assamese had suffered more than enough on account of the Burmese invasion, Moamoria Rebellion, and the downfall of Ahom kingdom. The British however, saw it as a golden opportunity to annex Assam to the vast British-Empire which consisted of almost the whole of India. The *Pyke* system was alive and the posts were filled up with non-Assamese, which did not go down well with the people, specially the intellectuals. The plans were afoot to overthrow the British yoke and re-establish the Ahom rule.

The first notable revolt against the British was led by Dhananjay Borgohain, Roopchand Konwar, and Gumadhar Konwar in 1828-29. Gumadhar Konwar was sentenced to seven years imprison and Dhananjay Borgohain who was ordered to be hanged, fled to the Matak kingdom. There he together with his sons Harakanta and Haranath, son-in-law Jeuram Dulia Baruah, Piyoli Barphukan, Rupchand and many others secretly set up a plan to attack Rangpur. But before they could execute the plans, Sadiya Khowa Gohain informed the British of their plans, because he wanted to prove his loyalty to the British. Piyoli Barphukan and Jeuram Dulia Baruah were hanged to death in 1830 and the rest were expelled from the country. Thus Assam passed into the hands of the British. Besides
Assam, they annexed Khamtis, Singhpho, Matak, Kachari, Naga, Garo, Luchai and other hilly kingdoms to the ever growing empire.

The years in between, as in rest of the country, witnessed the saga of the Indian Independence Movement marked by ungrudging sacrifices and unbreakable determination. The time had come when the people decided to take matters in their own hands. The famous revolt of 1857, found an echo in Assam under the leadership of Maniram Dewan and Piyoli Barua, who were consequently hanged in 1558. The British dispensed justice in a high handed manner, without making any distinction between the innocent and the guilty. Sir Holroyd had this to say in connection with the innocents pleading for fair trial that, "We will hang you first, try you afterwards."

On the other hand, the British sought to clamp to linguistic freedom of the natives by introducing Bengali as the medium of instruction in 1837. It was an unsuccessful attempt since the unstinted efforts by the American Baptist Missionaries, and front ranking personalities of the day like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Baruah, Gunabhiram Baruah that Assamese regained its place as the medium of instruction in 1873. During those days Calcutta was the Mecca of higher learning. The educated Assamese thought it was important that the element of cohesiveness should rejoin the social fabric of the state, so that the fight for liberty could percolate to every strata of the society. In 1884 Jagannath Baruah formed the first such organisation and named it Sarbajanik Sabha at
Jorhat. In 1916 the Assam Chatra Sanmilan and in 1917 Assam Sahitya Sabha(formerly known as Sadou Asom Sahitya Sanmilani) was formed. It was followed by Assam Association formed by Manik Chandra Baruah. In 1919, this particular association joined the Assam branch of Indian National Congress.

In 1919-20 like the rest of the country Assam also plunged into the non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhiji. Assam's participation in the national wave dates back to 1886 at the second session of Indian National Congress held at Calcutta, where Debi Chandra Baruah, Gopinath Bordoloi, Kamini Kumar Chandra, Bipin Chandra Pal, Satyanath Baruah, Joy Gobindasom represented Assam. The year 1912 is a memorable year in the annals of Assam history because of three things, which were: (1) Gandhiji's visit to Assam, (2) Strikes by Assam Bengal train service and steamer companies, which were the cause of widespread unrest and (3) After a period of 63 years i.e., in 1912, Assam passed into the hands of a Governor, thus paving the way for a dual administration, which lasted till 1936. Assam joined the rest of the country in the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930 launched by Gandhiji. In 1935 self governance in Assam was introduced. Assam plunged into the Quit India Movement in 1942 which was also popularly known as Peoples' Revolution.

**Post-Independence Period**

At the time of independence of India, Assam was consisted of the original Ahom kingdom, the present-day Arunachal Pradesh (North East Frontier
Agency), Naga Hills, original Kachari kingdom, Lushai Hills, and Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Sylhet district Assam province opted to join Pakistan in 1947 through a referendum; and the two princely states Manipur and Tripura became Group C provinces. The capital was Shillong. Sir Akbar Haidari became the first Governor of Independent Assam and Gopinath Bordoloi, the Chief Minister who laid the foundations of Gauhati University (1948), Gauhati High Court (1948), Guwahati Station of All India Radio.

Following Indian independence in 1947, the Assamese won control of their state assembly and launched a campaign to reassert the preeminence of Assamese culture in the region and improve employment opportunities for native Assamese. This led to the alienation of some tribal districts. In addition, many in the tribal districts were demanding independence from India. Thinking it would satisfy the tribals, the Indian Government partitioned Assam which resulted the creation of tribal states of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh over the next twenty years. The capital of Assam, which was in Shillong, had to be moved to Dispur, now a part of an expanding Guwahati. This was seen by Assamese leaders as a deliberate division of their constituency. In 1961, the Government of Assam passed legislation making the use of Assamese language compulsory. The legislation resulted in widespread protest in predominantly Bengali-speaking Barak Valley, particularly by the significant non-Assamese speaking minority. In one such incident, 11 Bengalis were killed by police firing in Silchar in southern Assam on May 19 1962. Coming under intense
pressure, the Government withdrew the legislation. Following the Pakistan civil war in 1971, nearly two million Bengali Muslim refugees migrated to Assam. Their illegal settlement and then their electoral support for Indira Gandhi's Congress government further aggravated Assamese fears of Bengali cultural domination and central government ambitions to undermine Assamese regional autonomy.

**Assam Agitation and its Consequence;**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there were persistent disputes between the government and Assamese students and some Assamese political factions over the rights of illegal immigrants to citizenship and suffrage. In the 1980s the Brahmaputra valley saw a six-year Assam Agitation that began non-violently but became increasingly violent. The movement was launched by the All Assam Students Union [AASU] and the Assam Gana Sangram Parishad has its roots in the remote past. The movement, which has culminated in the present form, is the continuation of the movement for a university in Assam during the period of the independence struggle and the movements for an oil refinery and official language in the post independence period. According to the ASSU:

"The simmering discontent has today erupted in a form of mass movement. It is, no longer, a movement today; it is a mass upsurge, indeed a mass Upheaval."

The movement took a unique form as has never been witnessed in the history of Assam. An upsurge of such magnitude, of what has now been made known as the movement for the preservation of cultural and socio-economic identity of the
Assamese people, the passions of the Assamese speaking Hindu community, particularly the caste Hindu section, have been raised to the boiling point. The steam it has generated has virtually engulfed the entire population of the state. The situation has been described by many journalists and intellectuals in the wards, “Assam is burning,” and it is true.

Experts have interpreted the movement in different ways. Some regard this movement as representative of the economic interests of a particular sections of the Assamese caste Hindus and upper classes. They believed that it was rather the design of the section of Assamese speaking people of Indo-Aryans stock, to assert their supremacy on all sections of ethnic and linguistic groups. The leaders of the movement had always expressed their apprehension that “Bengalis are posing an economic and political threat to indigenous Assamese people.” The Bengali Muslims are regarded as a political threat by the movement and Hindus as economic threat.

According to H.N. Rafiabadi, a noted researcher, Assam movement was indeed against Bengalis in general and other ethnic and linguistic communities changed its strategies according to circumstances. Occasionally there is tension. At present, politics is concerned with foreigners. Before 1947, these foreigners were called Mymensinghias, but now they are called Bangladeshis. In fact from the very beginning they are both Muslims and Hindus. Immigrants that came to Assam were of three principal types, tea garden labourers, Nepalese grazers and Mymensinghias.
The movement was triggered by the discovery of a sudden rise in registered voters on electoral rolls. The natives considered it as a war for survival against the onslaught of uncontrolled migration of millions from Bangladesh and elsewhere. The state government and the Government of India responded by the use of force to suppress the movement. Many demonstrators were killed. This led to some of India's worst communal violence since partition. The movement tried to force the government to identify and deport foreigners who, the natives maintained, are illegally inundating the land from neighboring Bangladesh and changing the demographics, gradually pushing the indigenous Assamese into a minority. The agitation ended after an accord between its leaders and the Union Government. Most of the accord remains unimplemented, causing simmering discontent. However, political parties have increasingly used the Bangladeshi card as a vote bank rather than addressing the concerns of the Assamese populace. In recent years, the Government of India has come to identify the problem of infiltration as a threat to national security. Former Governor of Assam (Retd) Lt Gen. S.K. Sinha makes this explicit in his report to the Government of India. An inhospitable terrain and a porous border constitute major challenges in checking infiltration. We will discuss about this report in the later chapter.

In 1985, a treaty was signed by the ASSU and the Government of India. This was followed by an election in which a very youthful, student-led government by the Axom (Akhom) Gana Parishad [AGP] party came to power. There was a lot of expectation among the people. Nevertheless, internal bickering
and charges of corruption, led to the downfall of the Axom Gana Parishad Ministry in 1990 although they came back to power later. There were wide-spread demands for greater autonomy; especially by the Bodo community in the later 1980s and 1990s. The 1990s have even seen the demand for the independence of Assam from the centralized Indian government by organizations such as the militarized group called ULFA, the United Liberation Front of Assam and NDFB National Democratic Front of Bodoland. Many other groups have come up demanding autonomy or independence. In November 1990, the union government has responded with widespread use of extra-ordinary forces and other measures to control the situation, leading to claims of human rights violations. The army deployment has now been institutionalized under a "Unified Command". Worsening inter-ethnic relationships also marked this period. There have been many armed encounters between the Army and the groups seeking independence. Thus, the period also has been marked by great violations of human rights by the Army and the police.

Problems in Assam

The people of Assam lived in a peaceful atmosphere of coexistence from the very beginning. The cultural exchange and assimilation goes back centuries into the past. It is only when the people of Assam lost their political independence to foreigners and began to undergo some kind of pressure from outsiders that this process of cultural assimilation got a setback and polarization started. This
genuine desire to preserve one's identity could not retain its peaceful pace, but turned into a violent movement, posing danger to other communities. A stage came when not only was one's life in danger for the strength of one's conviction, but one's intellectual and moral reputation was chipped away by hired hacks with systematic ruthlessness.22

The region was part of the British Empire and most of the nationalities of this region were integrated peacefully into the new country. Unfortunately economic indexes of the region, which were above average before independence, began to fall compared to the rest of the country. Militant groups began forming along ethnic lines after Independence, and demands for sovereignty grew, resulting in the new states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram in the 1970s. ULFA and NDFB are two major militant groups that came into existence in the 1980s, leading to a strong military crackdown. The low-intensity military conflict has been continuing for more than a decade now without an end to the insurgency at sight. High rural unemployment adds to this insurgency.

In the beginning of 20th Century the British tea planters started importing labourers from central India and present-day Bangladesh to work in the estates adding to the demographic canvas. It created antagonism among many of the ethnic groups who have been struggling to maintain their cultural heritage. There are active autonomy movements in the Bodo and Karbi dominated regions. In recent times, ethnicity based militant groups have mushroomed (NDFB, BLT,
UPDS, DHD, KLO, HPCD etc.) leading to violent inter-ethnic conflicts (e.g. the Hmar-Dimasa conflict). These extremist groups arose from among the hardliners in the Assam agitation. Many of these extremist groups have not given up their terrorist activities rather it is increasing day by day. ULFA came into limelight after the assassination of Mr. Kalipade Sen, President of the United Minorities Front of Assam, on October 17, 1986. The nucleus of the ULFA was formed as early as in April 1979 in an informal meeting of the activists of the Assam agitation, in the premises of Rang-ghar, Sibsagar. According to an ULFA bulletin, Assam lost its independence in a conspiracy in 1826 when Treaty of Yandaboo was signed between the two foreign powers – the British and the Burmese- in total disregard of Assamese public opinion. Since then, the Assamese people have become a victim Indian colonial and dictatorial rule.23

SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Assam has a great cultural tradition in literature, fine arts and performing arts and people artistic pursuits and the folk forms of arts. The Assamese people are rightly proud of their Vaishnava traditions and the inspiring part played by the great Sankaradeva who along with Mahadev propagated the path of monotheistic Bhakti in the fifteenth century and preached the doctrine “equality of men before God.” Assamese cultures traditionally a hybrid one, developed due to cultural assimilation of different ethno-cultural groups under various politico-economic systems in different periods of pre-history and history. The roots of the culture go
back to almost two thousand years when the first cultural assimilation took place with Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman as the major components.

Thereafter, western migrations such as those of various branches of Mediterraneans, Indo-scythians /Irano-scythians and Nordics along with (or in the form of) the mixed northern Indians (the ancient cultural mix already present in northern Indian states such as Magadha) have enriched the aboriginal culture and under certain stronger politico-economic systems, Sanskritisation (Hinduisation) intensified and became prominent. Such an assimilated culture therefore carries many elements of source cultures, of which exact roots are difficult to trace and are matter of research. However, in each of the elements of Assamese culture, i.e. language, traditional crafts, performing arts, festivity and beliefs either local elements or the local elements in a Hinduised forms are always present. The modern Assamese literature owes a dept of gratitude to the European Christian missionaries who began publishing in 1846 a monthly called Arunodoi which also gave Assames a written script of its own. Earlier in 1826 the Bible was translated by Assames by them. Morden Assamese literature has own recognition at the national level also.

Assamese culture is a rich conglomerate of ethnic practices and assimilated beliefs. When the Ahoms entered the region in 1228, they had their own cultural features. Over the six centuries of their rule, they adopted the local language, religion and cultural customs, and embellished it with their own to such an extent
that it puts them apart from medieval rulers of India. This is one reason why Assamese culture is so rich in heritage and values.

The ethnic origin of the Assamese varies from Mongoloid tribes to those of directly of the proto-Austroloids of ancient Assam. After the Austrics, the Mongoloids had entered into Assam. Among the Indian stock, the earliest inhabitants of Assam were probably of Austric stock. They are termed as “proto-Austroloid”, because they are said to have migrated from the Australian and some other islands of the Pacific Ocean to the Asiatic mainland. The Khasis and Jaintias appear to be descendents Mongoloids, the Bodo tribe appeared and established over the valley of Brahmaputra early. The Kacharis also were known as the Bodos who were once very powerful people. At a time, they are known to have ruled over the whole of Assam.

Broadly, the inhabitants of Assam can be divided into three categories, namely the tribal population, the non-tribal population and the scheduled castes. The Tribals consist of different ethno-cultural groups such as; the Kacharis (Bodos), the Meches, Abors, Mishmis, Tipra, Akas, Daflas, Kukis, Mikirs, Mizos, Miris, Deoris, Rabhas, Nagas, Garos, Khasis etc. The non-tribal groups include; Ahoms, the Kayasthas, the Kalitas, the Morans, the Muttaks, the Chutias, etc. The scheduled castes includes the Basfors, Baniyas, the Dhobis, the Hiras, the Kaibartas and the Namasudras, etc.
The immigration was mostly from West-Bengal, Bangladesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Nepal and Rajasthan. Another group was known as “Baganias” who were brought from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh by the British tea planters during the British period for employment. Some of the early settlers of Assam were of Aryan and Dravidian stock. The original inhabitants were known as the Kiratas of divergent tribal groups as mentioned in the Mahabharata. The fusion of divergent cultures of the Aryan, the Dravidians, the Austrics and the Mongoloid races take shape into composite culture of Ahoms in the 13th century, the Kacharis and Chutias were ruling over a large part of eastern Assam. Next came the Aryans who settled in the Brahmaputra valley at an early time. Of course, among different races, the Aryans could establish their cultural supremacy over this country.

There is a gradual development of liberalism in religious system in Assam. The indigenous groups are Animism, Tantricism, Brahmanism and Vaishnavism. The Assamese were practicing Tantric forms of rituals until the advent of the new Vaishnavite religion formed by Shrimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568). The pristine form of Hinduism began only when the Aryans arrived in Assam. The present Hindu caste system had emerged with the immigration of outsiders. Neo Vaishnavism entered the land in the 15th century and is the dominant faith if the Assamese people at present. The Assamese society is an open society based on the principles of liberalism. It allows the idol worshippers of Durga, Kali, Saraswati, and others to follow the Vaishnava faith.
Muslims started coming in the 13th century and established mosques in Assam. Christianity began to grow in the state from the time of the British rule and spread out to all corners of the eastern regions quickly. Caste system has never taken firm roots in the Assamese social stratification.

**Festivals:**

Assam is a land of fairs and festivals. Most of the festivals celebrated in Assam have their roots in the diverse faith and belief of her inhabitants. They reflect the true spirit, tradition and lifestyle of the people of Assam. The culture of Assam is a rich tapestry woven with multicolor yarns of distinct heritage of all the races that inhabit there. There are several important traditional festivals in Assam. Bihu is the most important and common and celebrated all over Assam.

Bihu is a series of three prominent festivals of Assam. Primarily a festival celebrated to mark the seasons and the significant points of a cultivator’s life over a yearly cycle, in recent times the form and nature of celebration has changed with the growth of urban centers. A non-religious festival, all communities---religious or ethnic---take part in it. Three Bihus are celebrated: Rongali, celebrated with the coming of spring and the beginning of the sowing season; Kongali, the barren Bihu when the fields are lush but the barns are empty; and the Bhogali, the thanksgiving when the crops have been harvested and the barns are full. Rongali, Kongali & Bhogali Bihu are also known as 'Bohag Bihu', 'Kati Bihu' and 'Magh Bihu' respectively. The day before the each Bihu is known as 'Uruka'. There are unique features of each Bihu. The first day of 'Rongali Bihu' is called 'Goru Bihu'.
(the Bihu of the cows). On this day, the cows are taken to the nearby rivers or ponds to be bathed with special care. Traditionally, cows are respected as sacred animals by the people of Assam. Bihu songs and Bihu dance are associated to *Rongali Bihu*.

Moreover, there are other important traditional festivals being celebrated every year for different occasions at different places. Many of these are celebrated by different ethno-cultural groups (sub and sister cultures). Some of these festivals are- *Baishagu* (celebrated by Bodo Kacharis during mid April), *Ali-Ai-Ligang* (festival of the Mishing tribe, February-March), *Baikho* (Rabha tribe, spring season), *Rongker* (important festival of the Karbis, April), *Rajini Gabra* and *Harni Gabra* (Dimasa tribe), *Bohaggyo Bishu* (spring festival of the Deoris), *Ambubashi Mela* (most important festival of the Kamakhya Temple is celebrated during mid June every year. It is a ritual of austerities celebrated with “tantric” rites) and *Jonbill Mela* (spectacular fair held every year during winter at Jonbeel of Jagiroad, near Guwahati) and so on.

*Satras of Majuli*; Satras are the unique features of Vaishnavism in Assam. Satras in Assam are basically monasteries which were established to propagate neo Vaishnavism. Later on, these also became centers for education and dissemination of all kinds of art of harmonious living. Satra culture developed mainly at Majuli, Bardowa, Barpeta, Madhupur etc. World's largest river island Majuli is the seat of several Satras established by Vaishnava revivalist, Sankardeva. During Rasotsava
several thousand devotees visit these holy Satras every year. The shrine is held in high veneration by the Vaishnavas.

**Shrimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra:** The Shrimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra has been conceived as a grand exposition of culture of the people of Assam, of its Many ethnic groups and tribes, the people who have made the cultural mosaic that the Assam of in all its beauty, the and splendor. Named after the great unifier of Assam and the greatest integrator of the Indian society on the fifteenth century, Srimanta Sankaradeva, the Kalakshetra attempted to capture and convey the essence of the great seers spirit, who preached the message of unity in diversity, sang the song of glorious Bharata- Varsha and the Universal brotherhood of man.

When the British invaded Assam in the 19th century, missionaries followed them and churches were established all over Assam. The people of Assam also celebrate Janmastmi Durga Puja, Diwali, Idd, Muharram, Me-Dam-Me-Phi, the birth and death anniversaries of the *Vaishnavite saints Shrimanta Sankardev and Shri Madhabdev.* Thus, Assam is a unique example of communal tolerance and religious harmony which prevails amongst the believer of different faiths. Assamese society is also remarkably free from communal conflict.

This Cultural Complexity was conceived by the Cultural Advisory Committee of the Government of Assam in a meeting held on 5th Aug. 1986. It was decided to set up a complex to serve as a centre of activities in the field of
dance, drama, music, fine arts, literature etc. with a view to preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the people of Assam. In the same year, a tentative plan for the cultural complex was prepared. At a later stage the same was named as the “Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra and on 2nd Feb. 1988 the foundation was laid.

Languages;

The dominant language in Assam is Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language belonging to the Indo European Language family. It has its roots in the Apabhramsa dialects developed from Magadhi Prakrit of the eastern group of Sanskritic languages. The Kamrupa variety of the Apabhramsa dialects made its way into Assam and eventually Assamese was created. That Assamese came into existence in Assam at a very early date can be gauged from the reference by Xuan-Ziang, a Chinese traveler who visited Assam in 643A.D. The copper plate inscriptions of the rulers of Kamarupa or Assam from the 5th through 13th century A.D. confirm such an observation.

Banikanta Kakati has divided the Assamese dialects into two major groups: Eastern Assamese and Western Assamese (Kakati 1941). However recent studies have shown that there are four dialect groups namely

1) The eastern Assamese dialects spoken in the districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur.
2) The central Assamese group of dialects spoken primarily in Nagoan and Morigaon districts and in some parts of Sonitpur and Jorhat districts also,
3) The Kamrupi group of dialects are spoken in the districts of Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, Darrang, Kokrajhar and Bongaigoan and
4) The Goalparia group of Assamese dialects spoken primarily in the Dhubri and Golapara districts and in certain areas of Kokrajhar and Bongaigoan districts (Moral, 1992).

Assamese and Bodo are the major indigenous and official languages of the state while Bengali holds official status in particular districts in the Barak Valley. Traditionally Assamese was the language of the common man (of mixed origin - Bodo, Khasi, Sanskrit, Magadhan Prakrit) of the ancient kingdoms such as Kamrupa and medieval kingdoms of Kamatapur, Kachari, Cuteeya, Borahi, Ahom and Koch. Traces of the language can be found in many poems in Charyapada written by Luipa, Sarahapa, etc during the period of the region. Probably the language was then required for economic integration and was also probably spread through the stronger and larger politico-economic systems such as that of the ancient Kamrupa. Traditional and localised forms of this language still exist in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, North Bengal, Kacar (Cachar) and in Southern Assam (similarities with Chittagonian language in present-day Bangladesh exists). The form used in the upper Assam was enriched by contributions from many eastern immigrations such as of those of Tai-Ahoms and others beginning from 13th century onwards.
Bodo is the ancient language of Assam and is mother of majority of the present day languages and dialects within the state and also in surrounding areas. Looking at the spatial distribution patterns of related ethno-cultural groups and their cultural traits and also phenomenon such as of naming all the major rivers in the North East Region with original Bodo words (e.g. Dihing, Dibru, Dihong, D/Tista, Dikrai, etc) it is understood that it was the most important language in the North East India in the ancient times, where history yet haven't opened its gates. Bodo is presently spoken largely in the Lower Assam areas mostly under the areas of Bodo Territorial Council. During past few decades (after years of neglect) it is fortunate that Bodo as a language is getting attention and much care is being taken for development of Bodo literature.

In the past century, migration of Bengalis to the medieval kingdom of Kachar (of Kocaries) in the Barak Valley has led to their majority, prompting the government of Assam to include Bengali as the official language in the Barak Valley districts. With a strong base of tradition and history, the modern Assamese culture is greatly influenced by various events those took place in the British Assam and in the Post-British Era. The language was standardised by the American Missionaries with the form available in the Sibsagar (Xiwoxagor) District (the nerve centre of the Ahom politico-economic system). A renewed Sanskritisation was increasingly adopted for developing Assamese language and grammar. A new wave of Western and northern Indian influence was apparent in the performing arts and literature.
The currently prevalent standard Assamese dialect has its roots in Sibsagar located in eastern Assam, when it was made the official language of the state by the British in 1872. Moreover the American Baptist Missionaries used it for literary activities at the same time and gradually it was accepted by the entire Assamese community as the standard norm. However the shift of activity from Sibsagar to Guwahati in the early part of this century has also resulted in a change gradually to this dialect to arrive at its present form which will be referred to as the contemporary standard. Currently the population of Assamese speakers is 12,841,744 (2001 census). For the sake of linguistic interest it may be noted that Guwahati was largely instrumental in reshaping it. Other Indo-Aryan languages spoken in Assam is Bangla followed by a thin sprinkling of Nepali speakers. Bangla came into existence in Assam only after the Britishers annexed Assam from Myanmar in 1862. However over the years Bangla speakers from undivided Bengal has been coming over and settling in different parts of Assam and hence it has evolved as one of the major language spoken after Assamese (population 4856332) in almost all districts of Assam. Some Nepali speakers are sporadically scattered (population 432519) in some parts of Nagoan, Darrang, Sonitpur and Lakhimpur districts of Assam. Some Oriya speakers (140782) within the tea tribes of Assam (who came here after the Britishers took over) is also found in various Tea-belts in the Sonitpur, Darrang, Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Golaghat and the Tinsukia districts of Assam. Bishnupriya Manipuri (an Indo Aryan language) is spoken
primarily in the districts of Cachar in the Barak valley. Their population according to the 2001 census is 126,987.

**Table: Major Languages in Assam**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>12,841,744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>4,856,332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodo/ Boro</td>
<td>1,176,635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>769,076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipuri</td>
<td>126,987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>432,351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriya</td>
<td>136,201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miri</td>
<td>381,562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhojpuri</td>
<td>115,918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kachari</td>
<td>5,821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbi /Mikir</td>
<td>354,721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hajong</td>
<td>19,325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marwari</td>
<td>6,371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjabi</td>
<td>13,893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimasa</td>
<td>84,371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khasi</td>
<td>25,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuki</td>
<td>14,035</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lalung</td>
<td>32,633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabha</td>
<td>122,408</td>
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<tr>
<td>Santali</td>
<td>134,663</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zemi</td>
<td>11,541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lushai</td>
<td>2,717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garo</td>
<td>113,408</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assam is also rich with several native languages such as Micing, Karbi, Dimaca, Rabha, Tiwa, etc of Tibeto-Burman origin and are closely related to Bodo. There are also small groups of people in different part of Assam with
languages such as Tai-Phake, Tai-Aiton, Tai-Khamti, etc related to Tai-group of languages of Southern China and South East Asia. The Tai-Ahom language (brought by Sukaphaa and his followers) is now fortunately getting attentions for wide-spread research after centuries long care and preservation by the Bailungs (traditional priests), which is no more a spoken language for commons today. There are also small groups of people speaking Koch, Santali, Munda, Khasi, Garo, Hmar, Kuki, etc in different parts of Assam.
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