CHAPTER - VI

THE AGITATION AND THE NON-COMMunist NATIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES
The agitation over the foreigners issue rendered the national parties almost totally irrelevant in Assam Politics. If we look back at the party position in Assam Assembly elections from 1952 to 1983 except 1977, we find that the Congress Party dominated in the Assembly. It is interesting to note the percentage of poll by the respective political parties. "The Congress" polled 53 percent in 1952, 52 percent in 1957, 45 percent in 1962 and 1967, 57 percent in 1971 and 45 in 1977. In 1983, it was again the victory of Congress though marked by unprecedented violence and abnormally low polling rate. All the left parties put together polled 35 percent in 1952, 21 percent in 1957. The CPI polled 10.24 percent in 1952, 21 percent in 1957, 7 percent in 1962, 8 percent in 1967, 6 percent in 1971, 4.2 percent in 1977. Thus, there was a decline in the popularity of the C.P.I. The Jana Sangha polled 3.6 percent in 1952, 5.5 percent in 1967 and 2.46 percent in 1971. 

Although the Congress did not poll a substantial majority of the votes polled, some individual congressmen polled more than 60 percent of votes polled in their respective

1. These calculations were made by one of the most eminent political scientist of the North East India, see, V.Venkata Rao, "Lok Sabha Polls in Assam from 1952 to 1985", Assam Tribune 16th December, 1985.
constituencies. In 1952 and 1967 two congress candidates polled more than 60 percent of the votes polled and their number rose to six in 1971.

As regards the results of the Parliamentary elections, "the congress won all the eleven seats it contested in 1952, nine in 1957 and in 1962, ten in 1967, 13 in 1971, 10 in 1977. Thus the Congress contested 76 seats and won 62."  

Assam had been ruled uninterruptedly by the Congress from independence upto 1978. The Chief Ministers were Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnuram Medhi, B.P. Chaliha, M.M. Chaudhury, S.C. Sinha and finally Hiteswar Saikia. The Congress lost the 1978 Assembly elections. Since then, the State has had a Janata Government under Golap Borbora, a short lived Asom Janata Dal Ministry headed by J.N. Hazarika, a long spell of president's rule than a short lived Congress Ministry headed by S.A. Taimur, another period of President's rule and a second short lived Congress Ministry.  

From March 1982 upto 1983 Assam had been under President's rule. After 1983 election which was remarkable for unprecedented violence and abnormally low polling rate, Hiteswar Saikia became the Chief Minister of Assam. But after the 1985 election, the Asom

2. Ibid., Loc.cit.  
3. For details see, M. Joshi, Assam: The Indian Conflict (New Delhi, 1981), p. 3.
Gana Parishad Ministry headed by Prafulla Kr. Mahanta, the All Assam Students Union President during the movement sworn in.

Thus, the Congress had a near total hegemony over Assamese society with minor pockets of opposition. But "the Congress party was reduced to a non-entity during the 1985 elections. The party candidates could not even held meetings, their functions were boycotted." The following table clearly shows the position of the Congress party in 1985 Assembly election results. Election for one seat was countermanded.

Table - X: The Results of the 1985 Assembly Election (Assam)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats Secured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.G.P.</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress (I)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.M.F.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress (S)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.T.C.A.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI (M)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Though during the period of agitation the wrath of the agitators was directed against the national parties, particularly the Congress and the left parties, if we look back we find that Congress had not always been against raising the issue of immigration. It is this party which raised the problem of immigration in Assam before independence. Veteran Congress leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi etc. had been arguing consistently against unchecked immigration. In a letter to Mahatma Gandhi, Gopinath Bordoloi wrote in 1945, "The land settlement policy which was extremely advertised as a measure proposed to benefit the Muslim immigrants from Bengal as also the local indigenous people in the complete betrayal of the later including the innocent tribal people of the plains, schedule castes and other Hindus. All the grazing reserves which according to the notification should have been freed of the encroachers, have been allowed to be over run by the immigrants, while many indigenous people have been evicted to make room for Muslim immigrants."\(^5\)

In 1964, the Assam Congress Parliamentary party in their memorandum to Guljarilal Nanda, Home Minister, Government of India stated that there has been large scale infiltration of Pakistani nationals and they have been illegally entering Assam without being detected. To effectively control

\(^5\) Quoted in Jatin Sarmah's "What Bordoloi wrote to the Mahatma 38 years ago", *Assam Tribune*, August 5, 1985, p. 4.
this infiltration of foreign nationals the Congress Parliamentary Party pointed out at later date -

"Indian and Bangladesh borders must be completely sealed. All weather road communication should be constructed in the border for speedy movement of troops for patrolling the border. The strength of border security force should be increased." 6

Nehru, in 1960 agreed that in Assam, infiltration of Pakistani nationals has been taking place for a long time. He suggested that 1952 should be made the date of enquiry. 7 But this assurance of Nehru was left practically unimplemented. Because the Congress Party treated the minority as vote banks. They were assured of their votes every five year. So they refused to take any action against them. Manorama Sharma in an article stated that "the Congress Party in Assam which took shape in the first decade of the twentieth century, was always under the leadership of educated elite and the emerging Assamese middle classes. After independence, the Congress Party in Assam failed to articulate the aims and aspiration of the Assamese middle class - the most dominant class in Assamese society. This was because the class-character of the Congress Party in Assam could not be different from the class character of all India Congress Party." 8 In practice, the

7. Ibid.
Congress does not represent the interest of either middle class or the poorer section of people. The middle class in Assam wanted economic development of Assam. They demanded that raw materials of the State should be utilized for the industrial development of Assam, e.g., the middle class started the agitation for the establishment of oil refinery in 1957 and the second one in 1969. According to them, though Assam is rich in the oil fields, but she is deprived of the major profits. The Congress, on the other hand, failed to fulfill these demands of the Assamese middle class. But whatever be the criticism against the Congress party, it must be admitted that, it is this Congress Party which first pointed at the danger of immigration in Assam. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee in one of its many memoranda made the following suggestion:

"(1) That a target date not later than March 1965 to complete the deportation of Pak infiltrants in Assam be announced and acted accordingly.

(2) That the citizens National Register with house numbers intended for preparation of the Census of 1951, should be made the basis for detecting and deporting Pak nationals without any delay.

(3) That, adequate number of Tribunals be appointed immediately to achieve complete deportation of Pak nationals within the target date."
That, a strip of land with such depth as may be needed along the entire East Pakistan be cleared of all inhabitants and declared as "prohibited area for the defence of the country."  

What gave impetus and even legitimacy to illegal immigration was the anxiety of Assam's ruling elite to rely heavily on these illegal Muslim immigrants. As an eminent Assamese journalist pointed that Moinul Huq Choudhury was in the Muslim League till 1947 and he was the private secretary to M.A. Jinnah. "His induction into the Congress cabinet provided protection to the illegal Muslim immigrants. He and Fakruddin Ali Ahmed are said to have persuaded the Congress leadership to legitimise these immigrants to secure massive electoral support for the Congress leadership."  

Despite its awareness of the problem the Congress Party gradually began to take a myopic view of the problem in its own interest and did not realise at what cost to the nation it was extending support to these vote banks. V.I.K. Sarin observes, "Thus the larger interests of the country, including threat to its very security and integrity, were subordinated to serve the narrow party interests of the ruling

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elite." 11 The same writer further observes "Congress victories in the past for instance were shaped by the vast, unorganised peasantry, including the Muslims, indigenous and immigrants and Tea Garden labour. Though divided into two Congress (I) and Congress (S) they still rely on the same segments for support. In other words, the Muslim immigrants have become the fulcrum of power politics in Assam." 12

As Manorama Sharma puts it the Congress leadership in Assam was not able to support the demands of the Assamese people openly because the political activities of any party must articulate the interests of the classes to which their party belongs and not the interests of the classes to which they themselves belong. The Assam Congress leaders therefore, by and large articulated the class interests of the All India big landowing and big business classes." 13 The Congress therefore failed to mobilise vast majority of Assamese people. Not only this, the party's favour to the illegal immigrants, also alienated it from the Assamese people. This is also clear from 1985 election result, where Congress secured only 25 seats out of 126 seats. The complete failure of the Congress is due to the fact that, it failed to gain the confidence of the minorities. The minorities

12. Ibid.
felt, that the accord runs against their interest. They formed the United Minority Front and contested the election separately without helping the Congress party.

The Congress Party in Assam had a near total hegemony in the politics of Assam upto 1977. The Janata Party did form a ministry in Assam but with a meagre 27 percent of the total electorate while in other states, the Janata Party acquired an absolute majority, but in the Parliamentary elections that followed after the emergency, the Janata Party lost in Assam. It must be noted here that the class character of both the Janata and the Congress was the same. The election manifesto of Janata Party gave importance to the economic development of the people. "But they did not talk of changing the basic politics of production and distribution and of lessening the economic inequalities. Both the Janata and the Congress swore by the name of Gandhi. Majority of the Janata men were the erstwhile Congress activists." 14 It was the emergency excess which gave the Janata its victory in the 1977 elections. Janata Party in Assam as in the case of Congress too merely represented the interests of the All India Janata Party, that is why majority of the Assam electorate had not taken any interest in this political alternative. The Janata Party in Assam was not really an alternative to the Congress, that is why they failed to evoke any mass support from the voters.

At the beginning of 1978, the Janata Party in Assam seem to be siding with the Charan Singh faction of the Janata and "there were charges by some dissidents that Mr. Golap Borbora was too secular", Chief Minister agreed "that influx of refugees from Bangladesh and Nepal was assuming alarming proportions. He stated that his government had taken a firm stand in this matter." 15

During the Janata Party regime, the agitation on the foreigners issue started only with the attempts to hold the Mangaldai Parliamentary by-election in the first half of 1979. The constituency became vacant when Hiralal Patowari, who had been elected to the Parliament on the Janta ticket, died on 28th March 1979. The fruits of the emotions roused by the Mangaldai election were first seen in the Assam Bandh of 8 June 1979. The situation in Assam, may or may not have stabilised thereafter, but the change taking place in the Union Government would not let it. The Morarji Desai Ministry resigned on 15 July 1979 and Charan Singh formed a new government with the help of Congress-U. The Charan Singh Ministry was unable to face the Parliament and obtain a vote of confidence. The coalition government resigned on 20 August 1979. The Janata Party in Assam found it difficult and the Chief Minister resigned from the Assembly on 3rd September 1979. The agitation on foreign nationals issue was not very

strong during the time of Borbora. Because at that time, the agitation had started only and the Chief Minister Borbora did not remain in the office for a long time to go through the issue. After Mr. Borbora, Mr. Jogendra Nath Hazarika of Asom Janata Dal (9th September 1979 – 12th December 1979) was in power for a very short period.

The approach of the general elections again pushed the foreigners question into the background. "The chief election commissioner in the meantime had asked the electoral officers of Assam to include all names from the earlier voters list, in the draft electoral rolls." The statement of the chief election commissioner confused the people of Assam, because in one of his earlier statement, he agreed that there was the problem of inclusion of foreigners name in the electoral rolls. Chief Minister said that the chief election commissioner's directive to treat all names in the voters list as citizens was due to the influence of some political parties who were misleading the election commission. Mrs. Renuka Devi Barkataki a Janata leader met the President and the Deputy Prime Minister and discussed the inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls. Charan Singh agreed to ask the election commission to use the 1971 electoral rolls as

the basis and if this was not possible to use 1977 electoral rolls as the basis.\textsuperscript{18}

The decision of chief election commissioner was opposed by the members of AASU and AAGSP. There were bandhs, demonstration, picketing in all over Assam. The Chief Minister stated that ten (10) tribunals has been set up to hasten summary trial of intruders and for their deportation.\textsuperscript{19}

The Janata rule came to an end, when Congress (I) government came into power on 1979. Thus, the Janata Government had very little time to tackle the foreigners agitation in Assam. The Janata Government at the Centre was not very stable. In such a situation, they could not focus their attention on the foreigners issue.

Although the movement started in 1979, it did not take a massive turn immediately. Only after 1980, the issue started attracting a large majority of the Assamese people.

The Janata Party did try to solve the foreigners tangle in Assam. Mr. Ravindra Varma presented a formula on behalf of his party. The salient points were as follows:

(1) Those who entered Assam between 1961-71 would be put into four categories.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., Loc. Cit.
\textsuperscript{19} The Assam Tribune, 17th August 1979, (Gauhati), p.1.
(a) Those who applied for and obtained certificates of citizenship from a competent authority,
(b) Those who had been duly rehabilitated and resettled by the Assam Government but had not obtained citizenship certificates,
(c) Those who had not applied for or obtained citizenship certificates or had been resettled by the Government of Assam, and yet had their names inscribed on the electoral rolls, and
(d) Those who had neither obtained citizenship certificates nor got their names included on the rolls.

(2) Names in category (a) would be retained in the rolls.
(3) Complaints regarding indiscriminate issue or acquisition of citizenship certificates by fraudulent means or inadequate verification would be settled by an authority under section 10 of Citizenship Act.
(4) Names in category (b) would be retained in the electoral rolls.
(5) Pending scrutiny and adjudication by tribunals. No new citizenship certificates would be issued.
(6) In regard to names in category (c) complaints could be lodged for their deletion from the rolls or against the inclusion therein, on the basis of the Constitution and the existing laws, stating ground thereof. The onus for providing claims would be governed by the Constitution and the existing laws, in particular where
the person concerned can involve the protection of section 2 of the Immigrants expulsion from Assam Act 1950, which gives the right of residence and generates the right to apply for citizenship under the relevant sections of the Citizenship Act.

(7) Names of those found without valid claim would be removed from the rolls and placed in the category for dispersal.²⁰

Acceptance of Mr. Verma's new formula would mean that only a few thousand of 1961-71 immigrants into Assam would be dispersed. The AASU agreed that those who came between 1951-61 would stay in Assam, on condition that Government would disperse all those who came during 1961-71. By relying on 1950 Act, the formula appeared to be designed to uphold the Government contention that 1961-71 Hindu refugees were eligible to become citizens. The leaders of the movement stated that if tribunals were to rule in favour of permanent stay of foreigners with voting right, on the strength of proviso to section 2 of the 1950 Act, it would mean that only those who were not even voters or those who belonged to minority community would be dispersed. The Janata Party seems to have taken a more or less balanced position on the issue of violence associated with the movement. "What has

happened in Assam is neither a communal riot, nor is it a linguistic riot. It is an engineered riot. All the communities are affected, Assamese, Bengali Hindus, Immigrant Muslims and Tribals. In Nellie areas the tribals attacked but in Goalpara the tribals were attacked by the immigrant Muslims."  

The election of 1983 created an explosive situation in Assam. The election was suddenly declared without revising the electoral roll of 1979. As the 1979 electoral roll was not revised, lakhs of eligible Indian citizens name were not included in the list and lakhs of names of foreign nationals have not been deleted. The Central Government agreed during the course of discussion with the agitation leaders that those who entered Assam illegally after 1971 would be deported and their names would be deleted. But suddenly the Government declared that the 1979 electoral rolls would be the rolls for the election, all the entrants who came after 1971 were given coverage. This was greatly resented by the large majority of the Assamese who supported movement.  

The Janata Party held the Congress (I) Government responsible for the explosive situation prevailing in Assam before the 1983 Election and even after the election. Prof. Madhu Dandavate of Janata Party once stated that on the  

foreigners issue there are four important points - the detection of foreigners, the deletion of their names from the voters list, then dispersal of them and the last stage is deportation. Unless the Government discuss these points, the problem is not going to be solved. The Janata party has supported the views expressed by the leaders of the movement. Right from the beginning of the movement, this party criticised the Central Government policies on the foreigners issue. Almost all the opposition parties were against the ruling Congress (I) Government.

Among the opposition parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party has been the most vocal and articulate on the Assam crisis. It has been accessed by the centre of provoking if not systematically encouraging violence, an accusation which the B.J.P. denies by throwing back on the Centre the responsibility for the large scale violent unrest. Because of B.J.P.'s close association with the Rastriya Sayong Sevak Sangh and because of its known pro-Hindu stance its support to the Assam agitation has been interpreted in terms of its alleged anti-muslim politics. It has very often been suggested by Congress (I) that only because a large majority of the immigrants are muslims the BJP wants them deported. But an analysis of the BJP position vis-a-vis the movement shows that it did try to adopt a rational line.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee of B.J.P. announced a seven point formula for solving the Assam tangle. The seven points were as follows:

"(1) Detection of foreigners should be done on the basis of relevant provisions of the Constitution and existing laws, making use of the 1951 National Register and other relevant documents. Appeal from the decision shall lie with judicial tribunals.

(2) Cases of all entrants upto 1961 should be regularised.

(3) Foreigners who came during 1961-71 should be removed from the electoral rolls. Their burden should be shared by Assam as well as other states.

(4) Elections to the Lok Sabha and the Assembly should be on the basis of revised electoral rolls.

(5) Foreign nationals who came after 1971 should be deported. Cases of bonafide refugees should be considered on the basis of policy pronouncement made so far.

(6) Infiltration should be completely stopped.

(7) All repressive measures and press censorship should be withdrawn. All persons detained in connection with the movement, should be released. All pending detention orders should be cancelled."

This formula of B.J.P. is quite similar to that of the agitation leaders demands. The B.J.P., Janata and the Lok Dal did not participate in the Assam elections of 1983. They held that elections are being held on the basis of 1979 electoral rolls which they claim, contains the names of the foreigners.

The BJP has claimed that they have gained substantial support from the Assamese people. In 1982 alone the BJP unit says Bansilal Sonee, party observer for the north eastern region, gained 40,000 members.\(^25\)

BJP President, A.B. Vajpayee along with Rajya Sabha M.P., Jaswant Singh visited Assam during the time of agitation. The State units Vice President Dr. Jogeswar Mahanta raised the curtain on the visit by claiming "indigenous Assamese in Nowgong district were in grave danger of being liquidated by foreigners."\(^26\) BJP leaders even when they were in the Janata Party responded positively to the demand of deletion and deportation of foreign nationals.

Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee stated in 1978 that if infiltrations took place in any part of the country, whether it was Kashmir or Assam, the security of the whole nation was jeopardised and Government won't allow monetary considerations


to stand in the way of safeguarding the security of the country. He also stated that "this problem of infiltration is a recurring phenomenon and we must sit together and devise ways and means so that the north eastern region could be made secure and the people there should feel that their sorrows and worries are shared by the rest of the country." 27

While giving a speech in the Lok Sabha on 21 February 1983, Vajpayee stated that Mrs. Gandhi announced at an election meeting in Gauhati that nobody would be deported from Assam. The Hindustan Times dated 13 February, 1983, quoted Mrs. Gandhi "should we given a false promise that they will be removed, when we know that they will not be removed." 28 It means that nobody would be removed from Assam, even if he happens to be a foreigner. If there are no foreigners in Assam why did the Government agreed to deport those who, come to Assam after 1971.

On 27.11.78, Mr. Vajpayee gave the following reply to a question on the floor of Parliament: "(i) It has come to the notice of the Election Commission from time to time that large scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls, especially in the North Eastern Region has been taking place. (ii) In August 1975, the Ministry of Home Affairs instructed all the State Governments and the Administrations

of all the Union Territories that the State criminal investigation department might be instructed to take immediate steps to check the electoral rolls and if they discover the names of foreigners in the rolls, that fact might be brought to the notice of the concerned Electoral Registration Officers for getting such names deleted from the electoral rolls.\textsuperscript{29} The Election Commission have also issued instructions to the Chief Electoral Officers of the State/Union Territories concerned that if it is found that a large number of foreigners have managed to get their names registered in the electoral rolls, recourse should be had to the provisions of Section 22 of the Representation of the peoples Act, 1950, for getting the names of such persons deleted from the electoral rolls on the ground that they are not Indian citizens. The 1979 rolls were challenged in the high court. It was contented that elections could not be held on the basis of those rolls. The advocate general was asked to produce them by 4 in the afternoon. At 4 p.m. he told the Court that he would produce them the next morning at 10.00 o'clock. The next day when the high court assembled at 10.00 o'clock, the notification about the election issued the night before was produced. The high court found its hands were tied and neither they nor the Supreme Court could act in the matter.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{29} Organiser, Op. cit., p.2-5.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., Loc. cit.
Thus it is clear from above that the problem of immigration in Assam would not have reached such a grave situation if the political parties would have shown some interest in solving the problem. These parties were mostly concerned with their power politics. The Congress Party was quite aware of this grave problem even before independence. Pandit Nehru himself admitted about the large scale foreign infiltration into Assam. Though he assured the people of Assam that necessary steps would be taken to tackle this problem, but unfortunately nothing was done in practice. As we have mentioned earlier, the Congress Party treated the illegal immigrants as their vote banks. So they definitely would never take any steps which goes against their political motive. That is why A.B. Vajpayee President of BJP stated that "In the Assam election, Mrs. Gandhi did not visit any Assamese areas, but she visited only Bengali and Muslim Pockets." 31

The other opposition parties instead of trying to solve the problem, were busy criticising the Central Government. These parties were aware of the fact that Congress Party is loosing their popularity in Assam, so they were trying their best to establish their popularity in Assam. The BJP during the agitation time claimed that they have gained substantial support among the Assamese people. This statement of BJP clearly shows their real motive. But it must be

admitted, that the opposition parties time and again came out with their proposal to solve the problem of immigration in Assam. But their proposal were rejected by the Central Government. Whatever these parties have said regarding the issue cannot be taken for granted. Because these statements could not be expected to be free from their partisan interests. They were guided often by the immediate political interest of their own parties which led the Janata and the B.J.P. to support the major demands of the AASU and AAGSF. By doing this they of course hoped to win support of the majority of the Assamese. But the irony of the situation was that despite all their efforts at winning the heart of the Assamese voter, by supporting the movement, the non-communist national opposition parties met almost the same fate, so far as electoral positions was concerned as their communist counterparts who opposed the movement. So far as electoral politics was concerned, both the Communist and the non-Communist opposition parties failed to make any headway. The Congress Party which opposed the movement invited the wrath of the people and was rendered almost irrelevant. The treatment meted out to the national political parties of all shades suggest that the movement over the foreign nationals issue was inspired not merely by a fear of the immigrants but also by strong regional aspirations of the Assamese as a small and backward nationality.