CHAPTER IV

THE AGITATION ON THE FOREIGN NATIONAL ISSUE:
THE CHARACTER OF THE MOVEMENT AND THE ROLE
OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE PEASANTRY
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OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE PEASANTRY

As we have discussed in the previous chapter, the problem of immigration persisted even after independence. It is a fact that there had been large scale foreign infiltration into Assam and those foreigners had managed to enter their names in the electoral rolls of the state. Mr. S. L. Shakdhar, Chief Election Commissioner of India in the conference of the Chief Electoral Officers of the states held at Octacamund from October 24 to 26, 1978, commented that,

"I would like to refer to the alarming situation in some states especially in North-Eastern region wherefrom disturbing reports are coming regarding large scale inclusion of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls. In one case (Assam) the population in 1971 recorded an increase as high as 34.98 percent over the 1961 figures and this increase was attributed to the influx of a very large number of persons from the neighbouring countries. I think it may not be a wrong assessment to make, on the basis of the increase of 39.98 p.c. between the two census, the increase that is likely to be recorded in the 1991 census would be more than 100 p.c. over 1961 census." 1

Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Minister of External Affairs, during the Janata regime on 21.8.78 while replying to a call attention motion on the floor of the house of people on the issue

of influx of foreigners stated that the problem of infiltration is a recurring phenomenon and it is necessary to devise ways and means so that the north region could be made more secure.

It is quite clear from the following table that there has been an unusual increase in the number of voters in Assam.

Table - VIII: The increase in the number of voters in Assam from 1957-1979.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of voters</th>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>Percentage of Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>44,93,357</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>49,42,816</td>
<td>4,49,459</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>55,85,056</td>
<td>6,42,240</td>
<td>12.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>57,01,805</td>
<td>1,16,749</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>62,96,198</td>
<td>5,94,393</td>
<td>10.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>72,29,543</td>
<td>9,33,345</td>
<td>14.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(March)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>79,74,476</td>
<td>7,44,933</td>
<td>10.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Nov.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>85,37,497</td>
<td>5,63,021</td>
<td>7.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India (various reports).

In a survey of voting population the 'Statesman' put the increase in the electorate in Assam in 1980 over 1977 figures at 18.85 percent, one of the highest in India. It maintains, that the abnormal increase is due to immigration.
With particular reference to the district of Goalpara and Cachar the paper says:

"An offshoot of this population explosion has been a sudden change in the composition of the district electorate. The immigrants are in absolute majority in seven of the nineteen Assembly constituencies in the district. In five more constituencies they are numerous enough to be crucial for an electoral victory. There is a similar transformation in the smaller border district of Cachar, which returns fifteen legislators to the 126 number state Assembly."

The encroachment of foreign citizen on the electoral rolls soon became rule rather than an exception. The first official admission of such undesirable entry of non-citizens into the rolls appeared in *Influx-immigrations from East Pakistan*, a publication of the Ministry of External Affairs. It reported that the enlistment of foreigners in the voters lists took place at times at the instance of politically interested parties, who sought electoral support from illegal settlers from East Pakistan. The Chief Electoral Officer referred to the extraordinary enthusiasm of the immigrant population in getting themselves enrolled as voters. The revision and preparation of electoral rolls for a bye-election, following the death of the M.P. from the Mangaldai constituency of the

3. *Influx-Immigration from East Pakistan* (Published by DAVP for the Ministry of External Affairs, Delhi), 1963.
Lok Sabha in 1978, pinpointed the deluge of non-citizens sweeping over the electorate. "Out of 47,000 names of alleged foreigners, 36,000 were disposed of: out of these as many as 26,000 comprising over 72 percent were declared illegal entries by foreign nationals."^4

By then the people of Assam realised that the situation is quite grave. The question is, if so many foreigners could enroll their names in the electoral rolls of a single constituency, the situation could be similar or even worse in other constituencies. The All Assam Students Union demanded a thorough scrutiny of the electoral rolls of all the constituencies.

For the Assam students, it was nothing new to launch a fight for what they believed. AASU and its predecessor the All Assam Students' Association have been in the forefront of many struggles in Assam. These included, the successful agitation to establish a university at Gauhati, the construction of a bridge across Brahmaputra, the setting up of a refinery at Gauhati, and the 1960 and 1972 agitation over the issues of official language and medium of instruction in Assam.

The All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was formed on August 27, 1979, at Dibrugarh with representatives of the

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AASU the Assam Sahitya Sabha and the Purbanchaliya Loka Parishad. Later on, the Asom Jatiyatabadi Dal, Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuwa Chatra Parishad, Asom Yuvak Samaj, also joined the AAGSP.5

The Chief Election Commissioner, Mr. Sakdher who so boldly raised the issue of inclusion of large numbers of foreigners name in the electoral rolls of some of the constituencies, suddenly reversed his position in September 1979. He stayed the intensive scrutiny on September 11, 1979 stating that the voters list of 1977 would not be disturbed. Thus, it became clear to the people that he also, became the easy victim of political pressure. The statement of Sakdher confused the people of Assam and the AASU and AAGSP started the agitation with their demand for detection, deletion and deportation of foreigners.

The Agitation as claimed by the agitators is a mass movement directed towards the preservation of the socio-cultural and political identity of Assam within the state of India.6 The identity crisis in Assam appears to be a complex problem involving social, cultural, political and economic dimensions which need to be attended to in any policy for

6. Save Assam today to save India tomorrow: An Appeal from the people of Assam (AASU and AAGSP, Gauhati, 15 May 1980).
restoring the identity of Assamese people. But before one can take up such issues one has to examine the question whether this crisis of identity is real or not. One must however realise that even if such a crisis is not real, the very existence of such a feeling might create a serious problem for the body politic.

In a multi-lingual and heterogeneous state like India, the Constituent Units will not contribute to the process of national development unless their people have roots in society and develop a firm sense of identity. National identity and unity can be strengthened only on the basis of local and regional identities. The question at issue in Assam as pointed out by the agitators is the very survival of the Assamese culture, language, polity and economy. This crisis is on the other hand viewed as the result of excessive influx of foreign nationals into Assam. The problem of migration into Assam thus acquires unbelievable proportions in Assam's politics.7

In no other states or region of the country, does one hear of a movement which has generated so much heat and

7. For information on the Assam movement, see the following Books. (1) B.L. Abbi (ed.) Problems and Prospects of Development in the NE Region (Chandigarh, 1984). (2) A.K. Das, Assam Agony - A Socio-Economic and Political Analysis (New Delhi, 1982). (3) Hiren Gohain, Assam a Burning Question (Gauhati, 1985). (4) M. Joshi, Assam - The Indian Conflict (New Delhi, 1981).
controversy as the agitation in Assam. The sponsors of the movement AASU and AAGdP say that:

"theirs is an open book, and their objectives are clear and simple. They are detection and deportation of all illegal foreign settlers and deletion of their names from the electoral rolls. Therefore they maintain that, what they are fighting for is what every Indian should fight for in defence of the country, the people and the Constitution." 8

On the other hand, the leftist parties led mainly by the CPI(M) argue that the so called foreigners issue is invented mainly to institute a legal cover to revive the old campaign against Bengalees, Muslims and other Indians living in Assam for generations. Thus they view the movement as anti-national, anti-Bengalee, anti-Muslims, patently chauvinistic and even secessionist. 9

This problem has been studied by various scholars from an array of varying perspectives. Amalendu Guha in his article "Little nationalism turned Chauvinist" pointed out that the fear of the Assamese about losing their identity as a result of large scale immigration is most unreal. He even calls it a fear psychosis. He pointed out that there is a

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decline in the Bengali speaking population in Assam." However, other scholars have shown that the growth rate of Bengali speaking population in recent times is much higher than the Assamese speaking population. While the Bengali speaking population increased at a rate of 20.04% during the decade 1951-60, in the next decade this rate was 41%. The corresponding figures for the Assamese speaking people were 36.47 and 31.26. But these figures do not show clearly the actual growth rate of Bengali speaking population, because many Bengali speakers recorded Assamese as their mother tongue due to political consideration. While refuting Guha's argument on this issue Apurba Baruah says, "when in 1951, there was a rise in Assamese speaking population, Guha himself pointed out that this was because many Bengali speakers who had earlier recorded themselves as Bengali for political reasons declared themselves to be Assamese. So there is every chance that the immigrants would

also resort to such policies. Therefore the fear of the Assamese about losing their identity may not be unreal.\textsuperscript{12}

There are some other scholars like Hiren Gohain and Homen Borgohain who pointed out that the Assam movement was directed against all non-Assamese outsiders.\textsuperscript{13} The AASU and AAGSP, the two main organisations spearheading the movement, repeatedly pointed out that this movement is not directed against all outsiders residing in Assam. This movement according to them was neither racial nor communal. On the other hand Indians from other parts of India who are living in Assam were supporting this agitation spontaneously.\textsuperscript{14} They had been living peacefully and pursuing their vocation or trade as it was before the movement. As Baruah says, "Had the movement been directed against all Bengalees or non-Assamese, trade centre like Guwahati and Tinsukia would have disrupted, where most of the trade is controlled by Marwaris and Bengalees."\textsuperscript{15}

The AASU and AAGSP in their publications have been reiterating that the movement is peaceful and non-violent.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., \textit{Loc.cit.}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Hiren Gohain, "Assam fall out of underdevelopment", \textit{Economic and Political Weekly}, Vol. XV, No. 12 (March 22, 1980).
  \item \textsuperscript{14} \textit{Save Assam Today to Save India Tomorrow: An Appeal from the people of Assam} (AASU and AAGSP, Gauhati, 15 May, 1980).
\end{itemize}
But there were indeed some acts of violence against the non-Assamese; these might have been caused by some anti-social elements may be with support from vested interests.

The AASU and AAGSP in their publications declared that the movement is not secessionist in nature. They stated that their main aim is to maintain the territorial integrity of India. The AASU and AAGSP declare:

"We declare unequivocally that we are not secessionist, our main aim has been to maintain the territorial integrity of India and to thwart the evil designs of those who want to create instability through infiltration .... Our struggle is only against the illegal foreigners whose presents in Assam threatens the economic, cultural and political existence of the indigenous people of Assam. It is only against non-Indians staying illegally in India and not against people from rest of India who are residing in Assam." 16

It must be admitted that there is hardly any evidence to disprove the AASU and AAGSP claim that the movement is not anti-Indian. Some scholars like Tilotama Misra pointed out that the economic backwardness is the main cause behind the Assam movement. It is true that the immigrants dominated the economic life of Assam in such a manner that the local Assamese entrepreneurs found themselves in a helpless position. Raw materials of the state have been taken out to other

regions of India for developing industries in those areas. The unemployment problem in Assam is also acute. Dominance of immigrants in the job market adds fuel to the grievances of the Assamese. The immigrants also enjoyed dominant positions in the key-sectors of employment. Myron Weiner has shown that even in 1961 about 57 percent of the employees in transport and communications were immigrants. The dominant position enjoyed by the immigrants in the job market has been pointed out by the Employment Review Committee of the Government of Assam itself. In its third report, the committee submitted that "in a survey of 28 units comprising 7 public sector industries, 16 private sector industries and 5 banks, with a total strength of 29,537 employees, only 14,368 or 49 percent had their birth place in Assam and only 10,473 or 35 percent had Assamese as their mother tongue. The committee further noted that of the 2,095 employees in the Class I and II only 762 or 36 percent had their birth place in Assam."

There were many critics who pointed out that jobs particularly the profitable ones, go to outsiders because

there is a lack of specialists among the Assamese people. Hiren Gohain in his article "On the present Assam movement" also shared this view. But this position is not tenable because as Apurba Baruah pointed out in his article "Elites in a Colonial Hinterland" in most cases persons occupying the Class I and II jobs do not have any specialised knowledge. Baruah used the Employment Review Committees 8th report figures to say that in the plywood industry out of 87 senior officers, 66 or 76 percent are from outside Assam. And out of these 90 percent have only general education and only five have engineering degrees. As regards general education, 9 percent have master degrees, 44 percent are only graduates, 18 percent are intermediate, 23 percent are matriculates and 6 percent below matric. Baruah also pointed out that Oil and Natural Gas Commission which is a big employer, in Nazira 148 class I officers are from outside Assam. 61 percent had no technical qualifications, 24 percent had engineering degrees and 8 percent were diploma holders of the 61 percent officers with general qualifications, 36 percent had master degrees, 35 percent were graduates, 21 percent were intermediates and 8 percent were matriculates.


22. Ibid., Loc.cit.
There is no doubt that Assam is economically very poor and that there are good reasons for the people of Assam to have a feeling of being neglected and deprived. The British had invested in Tea plantations, in timber, in oil, in railways and river transport, since then no major industries have come up in Assam. It is really a pity that until 1987 there has been only one bridge to span the Brahmaputra, and that too was secured after a long drawn agitation. The Tea gardens have their head offices in Calcutta. As much as 80 percent of the products of plywood factories in Assam are proposed in depots outside the state. The two movements for the establishment of refineries in Assam to prevent crude extracted from the oil fields of the region, from being refined outside the state, were manifestations of the growing consciousness of the Assamese middle class about the internal colonial status of Assam.

Soon after Assam lost her independence in 1826, after the treaty of Yandabo, the British began tea cultivation in Assam. The initial experiment was so successful that the British sought to establish full control and monopoly over this industry by forming the Assam Tea Company in 1840. Special rules like the waste land grant rules of 1838, old

Assam rules of 1854, Fee simple rules of 1874 and new lease rules of 1876 enabled the British planters to own large tracts of the most fertile land of Assam at highly concessional rates. Under the waste land grant rules of 1838, for instance, one-fourth of the total land acquired for a tea garden could be enjoyed free for life by the owner and even the rest of the land could be free for periods varying from 5 to 20 years depending on the productivity of the soil. Thus the British planters became the owners of almost seven lakh acres of tax free land in Assam, while the local Assamese peasants paid two to three rupees per acre of land revenue to the British masters. Aspiring Assamese planters were discriminated against and discouraged from entering into competition with the British planters. The case of Maniram Dewan who was an astute politician and a minister to the Ahom King Purandar Singh was a typical example of the extent to which the British colonialists go to prevent native enterprise in the Tea business. When Dewan started first private Tea Gardens in Assam, he had to face various obstacles put in his way by the British. "Later the main charges of inciting rebellion against the British government were brought against Dewan. There were many letters written to the Government by the Assam Company, the Margherita Company and Nakchari Company. But it is wrong to say that the

25. Ibid., Loc.cit.
British never encouraged Assamese planters. Once they got themselves established firmly in Tea, they began to encourage a few, among the then Assamese gentry perhaps as an attempt at placating them. As a result a small number of Assamese planters began to make a mark. Jagannath Baruah was a pioneer in the field. These planters were, however, not a threat to the British, as they were very few. Dewans success in the Tea plantation refutes the view of Hiren Gohain that monopoly of outsiders over lucrative Tea jobs, is because of a inferiority complex and the lack of local skill and enterprise.\(^{26}\) The Bengalee Bourgeoisie from Calcutta were also on a advantageous position. They entered the tea business as shareholders with the British Colonialists, and enjoyed profits from it. It is to be noted here that "out of 11 members of the 1st set of board of directors of the Assam Tea Company were from Bengal. They were Dwarikanath Tagore, Motilal Sheel and Prasanna Kr. Tagore."\(^{27}\)

The British made enormous profits from the Tea industry in Assam. With a nominal capital investment they kept the profits margin high by paying low wages to the labourers, brought from the poverty stricken areas of Bihar, Orissa and

\(^{26}\) Hiren Gohain, 'Assam fall out of underdevelopments', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XV, No.12 (March 22, 1980).

Madras Presidency. Initially local Assamese were employed as labourers, but later on it was discontinued because the British found among the Assamese signs of rebellion and discontentment. So they could not risk an open conflict with the tribal population of Assam. \(^{28}\) But the immigrant labourers could be exploited and ill-treated without much impact on the surrounding villages. The British planters never invested a single penny for the welfare and developmental activities in the state. \(^{29}\) Instead the enormous profits from Assam's Tea Garden enriched Britain and its people. Today out of 620 Tea Gardens in the Brahmaputra Valley, only about 158 are owned by Assamese planters. Of the remaining Gardens, excluding 12 Gardens owned by Assam Tea Corporation and one owned by the Assam Tea employees industrial cooperative limited as many 248 Gardens are owned by the non-Assamese big bourgeoisie. \(^{30}\)

In the field of oil, Assam has an estimated reserve of 70,46 million tonnes of crude oil and 23,000 million cubic metres of natural Gas. \(^{31}\) About 43 lakh tonnes of crude oil is produced by the oil fields of Upper Assam, has a very

\(^{28}\) Amalendu Guha, _Planter Rai to Swaraj_ (New Delhi, 1977) p. 21.

\(^{29}\) Homen Borgohain, _Aupamibeshik Soshanar Birudhe Asomar Sesh Sangram_ (Assamese), Gauhati, 1980, p. 64.

high percentage of aromatic content, it is rated high in the world market."\textsuperscript{31} The suggestion of the Soviet experts for the establishment of a large scale refinery at Silghat near Nowgong was rejected by the Government.\textsuperscript{32} There could have been no other reason except vested political interest for the establishment of a large public sector refinery for Assam crude at Barauni "with an annual capacity of more than 30 lakh tonnes. Mass movement protesting against this unfair decision of the centre were staged in Assam in 1956-57, as a result of which the centre tried to appease the Assamese by establishing a small refinery at Gauhati with an annual refining capacity of about 7 lakh tonnes."\textsuperscript{33}

These grievances of the Assamese people were articulated by the Assamese middle class. The sense of relative deprivation of the Assamese middle class, led to a sense of insecurity. The foreigners issue is a manifestation of these grievances. The result was that the Assamese middle class felt completely restless and deprived. They felt that unless they raise the important issue like the immigration before the Government, they would be the worst victims in their own land.

\begin{flushright}
32. Ibid., \textit{Loc.cit}.
33. \textit{Loc.cit}.
\end{flushright}
In Assam, the students have, for a long time, played a major role in political movement and agitations. The students launched three important struggles for the protection of the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese people. The 1960 issue over the official language, the 1972 over the medium of instruction and the third the agitation over the foreign nationals, although they have been condemned by many intellectuals politicians and a section of the national press.

Since 1826 Assamese society was a semi-tribal, semi-feudal society of petty producers, though the British monetised the economy. Neither the bourgeoisie as a class nor the landlord class evolved during the British regime, the ground however was laid for the emergence of the Assamese middle class. This class was to a large extent, the product of western education. It came into direct conflict with the Bengali middle class, which had dominated the administration during the early part of British rule.

Out of this conflict, which had strong economic roots, and which was reflected in the struggle for the restoration of the rightful place of the Assamese language, the Assamese middle class attained a degree of identity and leadership.

It must be mentioned here that initially, in Assam the

34. The students in Assam had to fight for the establishment of the oil refinery in 1957, the Food Agitation 1966, Second movement for the establishment of oil refinery in 1969. In 1974 there was the 21 point movement.
language of the court was Persian, in 1831 it was replaced by Bengali, and thus Bengali was introduced as medium of instruction. Had there been an organised middle class, this trend would have received immediate resistance. But we must also note here that in 1909 spokesman of the Assamese middle class Manik Ch. Baruah spoke about the exclusive rights of the children of the soil to the public services of their country.  

The cultural insecurity which the middle class felt, is not a recent problem. If we go back to history, we have found that in 1937, representatives of these middle classes in their memorandum to Nehru suggested that "if Cachar and Sylhet were separated from Assam, which were completely Bengali dominated area, the people of Assam would be the staunchest supporters of Congress." In the post independence period, the people of Assam fought for the language issue. It must be admitted here that chauvinist elements did take advantage of the problem, and change the issue into Assamese versus Bengalis. But whatever be their attitude, we must not lose sight of the genuine fears of the people of Assam.

The foreigner issue, to some extent, is the result of a conflict over jobs, land and cultural insecurity. As we have mentioned earlier, the grievances against the immigrants are articulated by the Assamese middle class. This middle class however continued to retain and nourish their ties with the peasantry. There has been strong links between the Assamese middle class and the peasantry which is clear from the responses of the peasantry towards the foreigners agitation.

The Assamese middle class has not been alienated from its rural roots and this has given them a strength and confidence quite uncharacteristic of their class. If we look back, we found that some representatives of the so called middle class like Manik Ch. Baruah, Dinnath Bezbaruah, Anandarm Dhekial Phukan, Nobin Ch. Bordoloi, Tarun Ram Phukan etc. belonged either to the landed Aristocracy, Maujadar families or to Vaishnavite Satras. They had considerable landed estate and private landed property. The middle class which is made up of educated sections of people belonging, not only to the caste hindus, but also tribal and ethnic people easily constitutes the most important class in relation to the current movement. In the absence of an Assamese bourgeoisie and the existence of a weak Assamese proletariat the

Assamese middle class along with the peasantry from the main base of the Assamese society. The Assamese middle class also came to realise that uneven development of Assam's economy has converted Assam into a colonial hinterland. As Tilottama Misra pointed out, "A positive outcome of the agitation in foreigners issue is the growing awareness among the Assamese people of being subjected to gross economic exploitation on a large scale comparable to, and sometimes even worse than in the pre-independence days."^38

The participation of the Assamese peasantry is highly significant in the foreigners agitation in Assam. Chaitanya Kalbagh says "The Assam movement had undoubtedly acquired gigantic proportions. It was no longer confined to cities and towns but also to the villages."^39 There were lakhs of people in the demonstrations, this could not have been possible without active participation of the peasantry. The resistance the 1983 elections received in rural Assam also proves that peasantry did participate in a big way. It was so serious that even the unwilling Election Commission has to adjourn the poll in 17 constituencies. "The number of lowest votes cast was 267 out of an electorate of 69,309 in the Dharampur constituency in Kamrup district."^40

The participation of the peasantry in the agitation over the foreigners issue cannot be understood without taking into account tremendous pressure on cultivable land in the 1951 to 71 period. According to the national Atlas 1971, Assam was subjected to the greatest population pressure between 1961 and 1971 with the density of population rising from 138 sq.km. to 186 per sq.km. during the decade the rise of almost 35 percent. In no other state, one-third increase in population density is recorded. According to Guha, this is because of the rise of Assamese speaking population.\footnote{41} This view of Guha is not correct. As we have seen in Nowgong and Kamrup district, the local people have been eased out of their land by immigrants. "In Nowgong district where the density of population has risen from 156 persons per sq.km. in 1951 to 302 persons per sq.km. in 1971. Vast areas once held by indigenous tribals are today in almost total occupation by immigrants except the few reserved tribal blocks."\footnote{42}

The participation of peasants, may also have something to do with the peasant nationalism in Assam. It is evident, in Assam that peasant nationalism penetrated into the middle classes from the peasant organisations and throughout the anti-British struggle, even when led by the middle class

\footnote{41. A. Guha, "Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist", \textit{Economic and Political Weekly}, Special Number 1980, pp. 1699-1720.}
congress leaders, the rural masses played the most important role. Thus, the Assamese peasants unlike peasants in pure feudal set-up, have tradition of a strong militant national consciousness. That is why, even today, when the threat of invasion of their land by foreign nationals is held out to them, they organise themselves without much help from the urban centres. The mass movement on foreign nationals issue in Assam was therefore nothing new to the Assamese rural masses. They organised mass meetings and marched out in their thousands to demonstrate in front of the subdivisional and district headquarters. The Assamese peasants view the foreigners issue as a threat to their homeland. The return of 'Tamra-patras' by freedom fighters most of whom are from villages was also an expression of the feeling that the government of India had betrayed the interest of the people of Assam, thereby threatening their existence as a people.

In Assam, the growth of 'Raij-Mels' is an important indicator to the growth of peasant nationalism in Assam. The organisation and leadership of these 'Raij-Mels' bring to focus many important features of Assamese society. These 'mels' were organised wholly by peasant and often had as their spokesmen or leaders the local religious heads such as the 'Dolois' and the 'Gossains'. These mels were loosely

43. Raij Mels - It is an Assamese word. It means peoples Assembly.
organised, there were no regular membership in it. All the people of a village or a few villages would have to gather together to form the Assembly. The leadership of the Mels was in the hands of the local leaders and the important men. "As the Vaishnava Satra (Monstry) organisation played an important role in the village life, very often the Gossains of the Satras and Dolois of the temples played a leading role in the Mels." The impact of the mels on the Assamese society was so strong that they inspired the creation of similar organisations in the urban areas under the leadership of the emerging new middle class of Assam. 'Ryot Sabhas' were organised in various towns of Assam in the latter half of the nineteenth century, e.g. the Tezpur Ryot Sabha (1884), the Nowgong Ryot Sabha (1886). All these Sabhas had strong peasant bases and though led by the educated urban middle class, they voiced mainly the demands of the Ryots. These Sabhas were germs of the Assam Association which was formed to place before the Revenue Secretary of the Government of India, Sir Denzil Ebetson, the demands of the peasantry. The Assam Association was the only active political organisation of the Assamese people till the year 1921 when the Indian National Congress establish its branch in Assam.

44. For a discussion on the Raj Mels and their role in pre-independence Assam see, Manorama S. Baruah, op.cit.
46. Ibid., Loc.cit.
In the pre-independence period when national consciousness was directed against the British, the middle class consciousness came into conflict, not only with the British imperialism but also with the aggressive Bengali nationalism. Middle class disillusionment with congress politics came soon after 1947 when the Congress leaders of Assam, instead of devoting attention to the immediate developmental programmes of the state, began to accept whatever policies the centre dictated regarding Assam. Thus the middle class congress leadership became alienated from the masses.

In Assam, the impoverishment of the peasantry led to the large scale transfer of land mostly from poor indigenous peasants, to immigrant Bangladeshis. As pressure on land increased the unchecked infiltration from across the border, became a matter of grave concern and dissatisfaction for the Assamese peasantry. Burdened as they were, with the refugees from Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) and Nepal, the unchecked infiltration and occupation of land began to rouse the wrath of the people against Congress Government. The Assam Tenancy Act of 1971 made it even easier for the illegal immigrants to become permanent legal owners of large tracts of land they had already occupied. This Act gives permanent, heritable and transferable rights to anyone who occupies the land continuously for three years. The immigrants have occupied not only every available piece of land in the Brahmaputra.
Valley and in the 'Char' (riverine) areas, but have also infiltrated into the tribal belts and blocks which had been especially created to protect the tribal people from a large number of outsiders mostly from East Bengal.\(^7\)

The foreigners problem in Assam would not have reached the explosive situations if the immigrants had assimilated with the Assamese society. Guha has suggested assimilation which he calls 'assamiysation' as a solution to the problem. But the immigrants in general and Bengali immigrants in particular with their numerical and cultural viability resisted assimilation. The immigrants concentrated in certain pockets, which reduced their needs to culturally and linguistically assimilate with the Assamese. Today in Assam there are some villages and towns, which are predominantly occupied by the Bengalees. The Assamese middle class consider these people as a threat to ethno-linguistic identity. "The example of Tripura where the Bengalis were once insignificant, today constitute over 70 percent of the states population."\(^8\) The Assamese middle class was afraid that if proper steps are not taken by the Government of Assam, Assam may convert into a second Tripura. Omvedt pointed out that this is not because

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\(^7\) See, Debo Prasad Baruah "Light on the Current Problems in Assam", *Assamiya*, fortnightly (Gauhati, 2 October, 1986).

\(^8\) Manash Ghosh, "The Quiet Influx" *The Statesman* (Calcutta, 5 January to 8 January) (Four write ups), 1981.
Bengalees are an oppressor nation, but because of the oppres-
sion they suffered. But it must be admitted that in any 
way, it is not going to help the problem in Assam.

Therefore it would be wrong to dismiss this problem
as a result of xenophobia. The mass upsurge centred round
the issue must be seen as the outburst of a nationality which
has had a long history of neglect, exploitation and suppress-
sion. As is evident from our discussion above, had it not
been for the ability of the Assamese middle class, to mobi-
lize the peasantry in the name of Assamese identity that the
movement could not have acquired the massive scale it did.
But the question is why should the peasants respond to the
call of the Assamese middle class to save Assamese identity?
There are two reasons: (i) Hope of alleviating their problems
about pressure on land, (ii) The hegemonic position of the
Assamese middle class. The ideas of the middle class have
influenced the Assamese society. Thus the Assam movement
though was led by the middle class, yet its muscle power
came from the peasantry. The Assamese middle class were suc-
cessful in touching a very sensitive string in the psyche of
the Assamese people that is, the fear of losing identity.

49. Gail Omvedt, "Aspects of the Assamese Problem",
Frontier Vol. 12, No.41, June 7, 1980, p.5.