CHAPTER III: Inter-ethnic Relations

"Juria is a bit like London, I would like to think. I have heard that you can walk around in London for the whole day and not hear the native language. It is the same in Juria."

- An Assamese Interviewee

Given the levels of violence in the two districts, an analysis of interethnic relations becomes important in order to assess the possibilities of reconciliation, or of traditions that allow for accommodation of others. One can make a claim for inherent forms of cosmopolitanism within Nagaon and Karbi Anglong, based on the fact that people speak many languages within the formal structure of a daily dialogue. However, speaking languages, sharing social spaces themselves do not constitute a sufficient condition for cosmopolitan notions of accommodating others as the tragic violence in the Balkans during the 1990s show (Woodward 1995). In that sense, Nagaon and Diphu can scarcely be called 'places of refuge'. They remain a space where subterranean and often overt conflict of interest is articulated along ethnic lines. When events like the planned killings of immigrant peoples in Nellie in 1983, or the sporadic violence between Karbi militia and other ethno-nationalist militia take place, it is impossible to speak in terms of modern cosmopolitan principles and institutions being operative. Yet, institutions such as courts of law, civic groups that establish ways of reconciliation and efforts at dialogue also form part of the repertoire of representations of ethnic identities in the two districts. It is

---

78 The interview was held on October 15, 2003 in Nagaon town. The interviewee, a young student leader-turned-businessperson, did not want to be named in the report. Juria was one of the case study areas and is situated on the banks of the river Luit (Brahmaputra). Migrants form an integral part of the area and are an important constituent for any form of political mobilisation.
therefore of greater importance to see if the daily, mundane dialogues that involve individuals speaking three (at times four) languages, evolve into expressions that allow the involvement of the 'other' in one's definition of identity and self. After all, one is not expected to learn languages in dialogue and then go on to use them independently of lived experiences. Especially with important issues such as identity, the principle of dialogue with the other, sometimes in struggles against, continues to define the perception of an, or collective self (Bakhtin 1984).

What then, are the conditions that inhibit, or aid the dialogic process in Nagaon and Karbi Anglong? This chapter attempts to respond to the question by analysing the impacts of statistical data and narratives, and see if they correlate to notions of how shared space is viewed by actors. At the core of the question is the language (political and social) that allows individuals and collectives to change the terms of discourse, especially during periods of crises. The construction of political others through an explicitly political agenda is outlined below. The description of political events and personalities involved in such events is taken up collectively, as they serve to bring out the similarities and differences in the two districts.

The outstanding feature of the economy of the region is the predominance of the primary and tertiary sectors. The proportion of persons in the primary sector that includes agriculture, forestry, fisheries and mineral extraction is higher than the national average. The secondary sector, i.e. industry is very weak in the region, while the tertiary sector that includes field like commerce, tourism and information technology are actually
subsidised by the state. Therefore, the tertiary sector includes mostly administrative jobs
(NEC 1995). Thus the primary sector is by far the largest for workforce participation in a
region where education, both government and private initiated, have left a large section
of qualified people. This has several implications. The primary sector is saturated and
cannot provide too many jobs to the educated youth. Even as policy efforts are oriented
towards changing the land-use patterns in the hills, few alternatives are provided.
Investment in the secondary has been negligible. Following the great investment rush of
the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the inflow of speculative has dried out to
such an extent that after the transfer of power, it has been a major grouse of students and
educated youth who take to frequent show of arms against the state. Hence, the spectre of
unemployment flows from the fact that neither the land-based primary sector, nor the
saturated tertiary sector can expand any further within the present political and
developmental paradigm (Fernandes and Barbora 2002: 106).

If one looks at the census of 1971 to get an idea of what kind of demographic
changes have taken place, the situation becomes clearer. The census shows that of a total
population of 14,957,452 in Assam, 13,435,081 were born within Assam. While people
born in other states of India accounted for a fraction of the total populace in Assam, Bihar
and Uttar Pradesh accounted 243,915 and 64323 persons respectively. This is a sizable
percentage of the inter-state migration, even by 1971 standards (Director of Census
Operations 1981: 6-10). West Bengal, Orissa and Rajasthan also accounted for places of
origin of many of the migrants. The external migration was recorded from Nepal (78,268)
and Pakistan79 (903,429). The inter-state migration was largely a “male” phenomenon.

---

79 This refers to undivided Pakistan. The area in question is today the nation-state of Bangladesh.
With the external migration, the sex ratio was almost even. This shows that inter-state migration was seasonal in the 1970s and gradually, as people acquired land and resources, they began to get their spouses and families back with them. In (undivided) Nagaon district, the 1971 census showed that Assamese speaking persons were the largest single language group, followed closely by the Bengali. The case study area would fall under Nagaon police station\textsuperscript{80}, where again the Assamese speaking people outnumbered others. The Bengali-speakers were the second largest group. Of the total migrants in Nagaon in 1971, most men were engaged as workers, with a vast majority claiming that they were from a different district within the state. Cultivators and agricultural labourers formed the next categories where migrants were attracted. It has to be mentioned that most of the respondents who claim that they are from a different district with Assam, usually come from densely populated districts that border east India and Bangladesh. It is often very difficult to verify whether they are from within the borders of India, or from countries in the neighbourhood. As it is, the long border that the Northeastern region shares with one of the most populated nations on earth is porous. Despite shrill political rhetoric demanding the “fencing” of the border, it is close to impossible to seal off the boundaries of modern nation-states which are almost always, arbitrary and have no clear idea of geographical, historical and cultural contiguities (Ludden 2003: 50- 53).

As early as the 1930s, Muslim League politics in Assam had begun to speak for the immigrant peasants from Sylhet and Mymensingh. Dev and Lahiri (1985) bring out the nuances in the political life of a frontier politician, Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, also

\textsuperscript{80} Police stations are also a census territorial category.
called Maulana Bhasani, in the politics of Assam. Maulana Bhasani championed the
cause of the Bengali Muslim cultivators in Assam. Bhasani’s politics was a combination
of Islam, piety, Muslim nationalism and a pride in being a Bengali (Islam 1973). Born in
Bengal, he was a product of the Deoband seminary where a radical Islamic theology is
taught. His spiritual quest brought him to Assam, where he threw in his lot with the
impoverished Muslim peasants of Bengal. He joined the Assam Congress in 1916 and
toured the chars where most of the migrants were locked in conflict with either the
authorities or recalcitrant locals. Sammadar (2004) says that he was instrumental in
forming alliances with Communists and mobilising peasants against the landlords in
Gauripur. He also started agitations against the Line system, especially in the district of
Nagaon where he felt that the rationale was racial, and for his undiluted passion as a
champion of the cause of the settlers; he was elected from the south Dhubri constituency
to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1930. The Maulana was critical of the role of the
landed Muslim gentry, especially his colleagues in the Assembly and often decried the
role of mattabars (powerful immigrant landowners) who exploited the settlers. He was
instrumental in leading the opposition to the Congress-led ministry’s decision to evict
settlers from government reserves in Nagaon in 1939.

The Congress and the Muslim League were the two main parties in the Assam
Legislative Assembly during the colonial period. While the Congress was technically
supposed to be a secular pan-Indian party, many of its leaders (in Assam) were caste
Hindus, or Christians and hence were not very inclined to throw in their lot with the
settlers. The Muslim League also had its share of Assamese Muslims in the party and its
leaders—like Mohammad Saadulla—were ethically opposed to the Line System imposed
by the colonial authorities. They attempted to subvert the clauses that were deemed unfriendly to settlers, such as following a policy of inaction to evictions. The (Muslim) League shared power, in an electoral sense, with the Congress and when evictions were on in Nagaon, it began an agitation where it promised land to the 2,00,000 landless immigrants but reneged on the promise when they came to power (Dev and Lahiri 1985: 33). This often led to publicised fall-outs with radical leaders such as Maulana Bhasani, who took the Muslim League to task for its seemingly vacillating attitude towards the plight of the settlers and towards the Line System. Therefore, it had to frequently resort to rhetoric like the now-famous “Grow More Food” programme and regularising encroachments (especially in Nagaon) when it came to power in 1942. These programmes were aimed at the prospective and existing migrants, who were promised more land on the plea that their agricultural expertise was essential to maintain the growth of essential and cash crops. The Muslim League and the Congress also had their supporters in the local press in Assam. It was through successful politicisation of the Line System in papers like the Assam Herald, that opponents of the system (such as Maulana Bhasani) could project it as the inevitable clash between two cultures— the hardworking settlers and the indolent locals, Muslims and Hindus and Christians, Bengalis and native Assamese— to their community (Dev and Lahiri ibid. 137).

The animosity between the Muslim League and Congress in Assam was a mirror image of its relationship in other parts of the sub-continent. The inclusion of Muslim dominated Sylhet to the province of Assam was a cause of great concern for Congress

---

81 Muslim League leaders like Mohammad Saadulla were reluctant to lose their political base amongst sections of the local Assamese and tribal populace. At the same time, they could scarce afford to alienate the settlers, who remained their strongest political base in the province of Assam.
82 Assam Secretariat, File No. RD 3/43.
persons and for sub-nationalists. Sylhet, it was said, was hindering the capacity of the Assamese politicians and public intellectuals to bargain in the legislative assembly, as the Muslim vote was upsetting the demographic composition of Assam. Hence the desire to be “rid of” Sylhet and the Muslim population that constituted bona-fide citizens of the province of Assam was almost unanimous amongst the Assamese (Guha 1977: 319-320).

Parallel to, and at times independent of the growth of settler-induced political mobilisation in the Luit (Brahmaputra) valley, was the increased assertion of the autonomy of the Assamese language and culture with Assamese public intellectuals petitioning against the use of Bengali in the courts and administration (Moffatt-Mills 1984: 105). Yet, academic and administrative opinion of the times seemed to conflate the Native Assamese language with Bengali. The linguist, G.A. Grierson said: “...Assamese might seem like a dialect of Bengali...Calcutta Bengali and standard (Sibsagar) Assamese have more in common than Calcutta Bengali and Chittagong Bengali” (Verma 1973: 570-578). Almost in direct contravention to Grierson’s formulations, upper class Assamese students in Calcutta had formed an association for the development of Assamese language in 1888 (Barpujari and Sarma 1993). Language therefore was one of the first and foremost areas where Assamese differences with Bengali appeared and it remained an issue vis-à-vis neighbouring hills and plains tribes in the post 1947 period.

The Assamese Hindu association with the Congress and pan-Indian political formations actually took place much after the ground had been laid by the cultural autonomists of the nineteenth century. The Assam Association, which until the early twentieth century represented the upcoming educated classes in the province, decided to send delegates to the Indian National Congress in 1916 and younger members voted to
merge with the Congress soon after. In 1933, efforts were made to revive the old Assam Association by older members (Sharma 1989: 144). The Assamese sub-nationalist spirit therefore survived and grew alongside the Indian national movement and during moments of crisis, such as discussions on the immigration policies, it urged the pan-Indian movement to be more attuned to the issue of settlers (Baruah 1999: 81-82).

Within the Congress, Assamese and tribal leaders formed pressure groups to try and put forward their political positions, especially on immigration and language. What galvanized the often disparate voices of the non-caste Hindu hill tribal leaders and the caste Hindu Assamese was the cabinet mission plan of 1946 that sought to make India a confederation of two groups of provinces- one Muslim and one Hindu- which was stoutly decried by non-Muslim Assamese political leaders (Baruah ibid: 84). The politics and policies League- Congress and intra-Congress squabbles over Assam often appeared in the secret communiqués between high-ranking colonial officials in Delhi and their counterparts in Assam. These communiqués even took into consideration the accounts of Congress and League politicians. De-classified colonial documents show how interviews between the viceroy of India, and Congress leaders like Nehru dwelt at length on the colonial government's inability to stop the Muslim League's direct action plan to occupy land in Assam and showed extreme concern about how the League's activities spilling over from Bengal into Assam (Mansergh, Moon et al 1981: 70-71). Indeed, the viceroy's admission that the province was in an unsettled state as the Bengal governor was unable to persuade the ministry to take action against Muslim immigrants demonstrating on the Assam border, testifies to the authorities' lack of control over the issue of borders and border crossings.\footnote{Viceroy's Personal Report, No. 1. L/ P&J/ 10/ 79: ff 522-5. in Mansergh, Moon et al.} The turbulence at the political centre did not always mirror the
concerns of the provincial leaders, as Congress leaders found it expedient to agree to the League’s demands for a partition of Assam, despite strong opposition from the Congress leaders in Assam ⁸⁴

When the dust finally settled on the partition drama, Assam was left without the district of Sylhet and remained within India. It was at this time that other fissures appeared on the political landscape of the province. Starting with the Naga national struggle, the ethnic assertion of different hill tribes resulted in the reorganisation of the province into quasi-linguistic states. ⁸⁵ However, sub-nationalist demands continued to fester in the erstwhile colonial province and immigration and language remained the lines along which political mobilisation was carried out. The government of Assam, manned mainly by caste-Hindu Assamese persons from the Luit (Brahmaputra) valley was seen as an aggressive proponent of the “one state, one language” policy. Its language policies violated the provisions of the Indian Constitution, especially Article 29 (1); Article 30 (1); Article 347; Article 350. In 1969-70, the state government was berated by the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities for not having ascertained the pupil strength and school facilities for linguistic minorities and for giving jobs to only those who learnt Assamese (Gopidas 1971: 10-15). In the following year, the commissioner mentioned in her report that the government of Assam’s stand to reserve the right to recognise any

---

⁸⁴ Interview between Right Admiral Viceroy Mountbatten of Burma and Pandit Nehru, April 11, 1947 (as cited in Record of interview No 125, Mansergh, Moon et al 1981, pp 199-200)

⁸⁵ It would be impossible to accede to a mono-lingual state in the Northeast. The states that were carved out of the colonial province of Assam were conglomerations of the domains of the numerous hill tribes. Thus, Khasi hills, Jaintia hill and Garo hills, home to various tribes other than the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo, together formed the state of Meghalaya

⁸⁶ Right of linguistic minorities to conserve their language and script

⁸⁷ Right of linguistic minorities to administer their educational institutions

⁸⁸ Right of linguistic minorities to recognition of their language the state

⁸⁹ Right to submit representation in any of the languages used in the Union of India
mother tongue ran contrary to the constitutional provisions in the country (Gopidas 1973: 12-18).

This plains-driven agenda did not bode well for the hill tribes. In numerous memoranda demanding separation from forced union, Karbi, Dimasa and Boro leaders came up with images of a collective self that did not have a similar resonance in mainstream politics of civic nationalist ideals. Hence, in a petition to the Prime Minister of India in 1973, leaders of the Mikir and North Cachar Hills stated:

"... there is an indisputable case for constitution of a separate state for Mikir and North Cachar Hills together with the contiguous tribal areas. Only by this means they (we) will be able to exist unhampered, preserve and develop their (our) entities, languages, cultures and ways of life and at the same time be in tune with the mainstream of national life, to sail the wide ocean that is India and not be restricted to the backwaters of the Brahmaputra valley."\(^9\)

Hence, it was more a statement against not being included in the vision of a "national self" and oriented against the closest symbol of power, the government and assembly of Assam. On the other hand, a feeling of betrayal was also prevalent in the political demands for an autonomous state in Karbi Anglong. The memorandum (quoted above) also reflects the deeper cultural distance that has taken place among indigenous people.

\(^9\) The memorandum demanding a separate state comprising the Mikir Hills, North Cachar Hills and the Contiguous Tribal Areas in Assam, was signed by Mr P K Gorlosa and Mr S R Thaosen, secretary and president respectively, of an action committee of the Mikir and North Cachar Hills Leaders’ Conference in Haflong in June 1973. Cf Dutta 1993
(from the hills) and the native Assamese, who had after all been accorded a history — albeit a highly contentious and contested one — in the nationalist discourse. In doing so, a particular intellectual space was created. A certain form of reading the histories of the indigenous peoples came to be accepted as the norm. The form and content of this reading followed a strict regimentation where the historical and anthropological location of the subject was made conditional to the linear passage of time and social formation. Given the whole textual and archaeological bias of writing colonial history, the political position of indigenous history (of the Karbi, Dimasa and other ethnic groups) was placed somewhere in the margins of the state-building project. Hills and plains become mere textual markers and their inhabitants, the subjects of different disciplines. Those who were part of a semi-feudal state formation, with kings/chiefs, and a cosmology that allowed social hierarchy, such as the Koch, Dimasa and Ahom are accorded a ‘history’, an identity that freezes them in time and politics. The memorandum for a separate hill state, therefore, can be seek as another effort to reclaim a limited space for asserting parity and equality in a post-British administrative set-up where indigenous people felt increasingly marginalised.

Time and again, the up-gradation of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills to a full-fledged state is cited as the moment of reckoning for the people of Karbi Anglong (Ingti 1999: 65). That the leaders from Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills decided to stay away from forming a separate state and thought it in their best interest not to merge with Meghalaya, is often explained as prudent bargaining on their part by those seeking to give the movement a teleology of sorts. It is clear that certain Karbi administrators and prominent persons were instrumental in the district being accorded special provisions
under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Following a period of lull in political activities, the Autonomous State Demand Committee was formed in 1986. Since its inception, it was poised as an anti-Congress formation led mainly by indigenous students who had participated in the Assam agitation and felt sidelined by the caste-Hindu native Assamese student leaders from the valley. The provisions for creating another state that would sever Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills was always a possibility given the existence of Article 244(A) of the Indian Constitution. However, political manoeuvres resulted in periodic clash of interest between the Congress and the increasingly Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) led Autonomous State District Committee.

This entire political mobilisation was not overtly against the presence of “outsiders”. The language did not target any group and continued to speak in terms of the district. However, discrepant notes were sounded within the autonomous state movement discourse itself. In the elections to the Executive Council in 1989, the ASDC won as many as 22 of the 26 seats. In its election manifesto, its leader Jayanta Rongpi stated that the objective of his party and the movement it had established was to “achieve more decentralisation of the political, economic, socio-cultural and parliamentary power and restore them...to the people of the region through the formation of an Autonomous State”. He further went on to assure other ethnic groups in Karbi Anglong that the movement was not hostile to non-Karbis and promised to check fratricidal strife among the different ethnic groups living in the territory. In June 2000, members of the United Peoples Democratic Front- an ethnic militia comprising militant Karbi youth- carried out

---

91 Article 244(A) recognises that some states can be created by upgradiing existing autonomous districts and councils. This was true especially in the case of the formation of the state of Meghalaya and has been retained exclusively for Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills

92 The Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) 1989 Election Manifesto The Karbi Anglong District Council Election 7th January, 1989 Diphu ASDC Cf Dutta 1993
attacks against Hindi-speaking agriculturalists in Hamren sub-division of Karbi Anglong. In retaliation, the settlers armed and aided by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) stationed nearby attacked Karbi villages, looting and killing many Karbi farmers. These violent events against settlers were repeated in 2001 and 2002. In 2003, a fresh series of ethnic conflicts erupted mainly due to the divisions between the Kuki and Karbi communities around the area of Singhason Hills. In March 2004, suspected members of a Karbi militia killed six Kuki ginger cultivators who had refused to pay them the taxes they demanded. In retaliation, members of the Kuki Revolutionary Army (a Kuki ethnic militia), raided three villages and killed as many as 30 Karbi farmers.

Ethnic relations in mixed areas like Hanlokrok, used to be amiable (to the extent that violent conflicts did not normally conflagrate into protracted ethnic conflicts) until October 2005. Even then, inter-community marriages are few and far between. Uttam, a Dimasa professional from the village says:

"...I was one of the few Dimasas who married outside the community. Normally, it is not done. There are few cases of Tiwas marrying Karbis, but otherwise it is not common."^93

During the course of my field visit to the village, all communities took part in the others' feasts and celebrations. During all-male drinking sessions in the evenings of market-day, young men of different ethnic origins spoke about childhood romances that transgressed ethnic lines and wistfully wondered where the objects of their affection could have gone. There was talk of corruption and not finding a place in the council among non-Karbi

---

^93 Uttam (name changed on request) is married to a woman of mixed Boro and Khasi parentage and is 30 years old. He does not live in the village but has family there who he visits regularly (November 12, 2005, Hojai)
revellers (especially when the group was not a mixed one, as the men felt they could say certain things only within the constraints of a kin community), which often veered into the missed opportunities of the movement for an autonomous state. The young males, though possibly supporters of parties other than the ASDC, spoke about the immense possibilities that could be realised, if only the two major indigenous communities – Karbis and Dimasas – could put aside their political differences. Against the backdrop of ethnic tensions directed towards Hindi-speaking settlers and the political-military establishment, the celebration (albeit enhanced by intoxicants) of a more plural political vision that alluded to possibilities of cooperation between indigenous groups (in 2003-4) seemed almost like a natural playing-out of strategic solidarities between the dominant indigenous communities in the village. Yet, this process and possibility received a drastic set-back in the autumn of 2005 following conflicts between the Dimasa and Karbi militia. It was almost as if the inexplicable primordial loyalties that discouraged inter-ethnic marriages, had taken control over a nascent romance to transcend ethnic boundaries. There are, however, pointers towards why this happened.

Despite the de-ethnicised language of the political movement for an autonomous state, it is therefore the armed movement that elicits more response from an unresponsive state. The armed movement was supposed to have started in the late 1980s in the district with the formation of the Karbi National Volunteers (KNV). The organisation had some support from the “mainstream” organisations (struggling for an autonomous state) but was allegedly financially and ideologically supported by groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and National Social Council of Nagalim (NSCN). The groups suffered some set-backs when its leadership was decimated in counter-insurgency
operations in the 1990s. In the late 1990s, it re-appeared as the United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and articulated the right of armed resistance for the indigenous people of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The constitutional roads to agitation and dissent were given up in favour of armed insurrection. Its structure and safeguards, instead of ameliorating the conditions of the ethnic Karbi are seen by supporters of the militia as effete and cunning ways to rob them of their natural resources and their right to people-hood. The formal letter of law, in the Constitution and in the autonomous council rules are also seen as double-faced inasmuch as they have not been able to deliver - precisely because the apportioning of responsibility for their enactment are not clearly laid out. On a diachronic scale, one may see the parallel growth of Karbi resentment against authority, against the development of capitalistic modes of agriculture; of economic deprivation and socio-political seclusion and of arrested development. While this story had a chance of redress in post-colonial times, the voice of the Karbi militia suggest that that has not taken place. It brings into question the very essence of provisions like the Sixth Schedule that are more self-congratulatory than realistic when it comes to upholding and understanding indigenous history and predicament. This discrepancy between formal rules of the game and informal occurrences; the tension between valorising “tribal tradition and community” and undermining community by extending the logic of private property; all contribute to the reaction- sometimes violent and always aggrieved. In 2003, a publication from the United Peoples Democratic Solidarity, partly addressed to its cadre and partly to the authorities says:
"...(therefore) our substantive demands are: 1). Full restoration of land rights to the tribal traditional authority- namely the sarthe94, 2). Full political security to the indigencus tribes and complete disfranchisement of non-tribal infiltrators who have settled within the territory after 1951, 3). Complete control over law, order and justice, 4). Complete control over natural and human resources of the territory and 5). Complete authority over all financial and developmental matters (and) direct access to the financial and economic authorities of India95

The demands are couched in the progressive discourse of indigenous rights and well within the juridical limits of the constitution. However, these demands also have an underlying logic of excluding people from a homeland- Hemprek- that has been constructed in the imagination as a pristine homeland that might have existed in the moment of pre-contact with the world and political structures of the colonisers. Today, after several rounds of ethnic clashes and military operations where several people have been affected, the demand for an autonomous state has run into calm waters. It seems to have lost steam, largely due to recurring splits within the movement and the overwhelming power that electoral politics is capable of exerting in obfuscating issues. For the ethnic militia, radical students and cultural leaders, Hemprek, is still an ideal though the road ahead is still perceived to be mired with compromises.

---

94 Sarihe was appointed to mediate cases in a village. He was usually the most respected person in the village and could adjudicate on any matters except murder and sex.
The peasantry in the Brahmaputra valley were politicised in the nineteenth century following debilitating losses suffered by the peasant economy after the penetration of the plantation complex. With the levying of taxes and growth of moneylenders in the peasant economy, led to one of the first peasant uprisings in the British colonial empire. The site was the weekly mart- *haat*- that is still used by the villagers of Srimala/ Gospara. In 1861, the demand for revenue from the colonial authorities and other expenses had increased the local cultivators’ level of indebtedness (Saikia 2000: 104-106). However, the colonial authorities in Nagaon proposed to further enhance the revenue from the peasants. They (the peasants) gathered in the weekly mart called Phuloguri and called for a *raij mel* (peoples’ assembly).\(^6\) Around fifteen thousands marched through the mart demanding that taxes on betel nut and *paan* be dropped (Guha 1977: 6). The authorities tried to put a stop to the proceedings but in the ensuing melee, a colonial official, Lieutenant Singer, was killed by the peasant insurrectionists. With the steady imposition of colonial rule, a native Assamese middle class emerged making steady inroads into science, colonial historiography and literature. Their cultural and economic gravitation towards metropolitan centres like Calcutta, allowed them a wider interaction with Indian nationalists and intelligentsia (Kar 2004). The Assamese elite chose initially to express itself through literary works and organised itself as the Assamese Literary Society in Calcutta in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Bora 1992: 7-10). The Assamese elite – like sections of the colonised peoples

\(^6\) *Raij mel*- or “peoples’ assemblies” are a political expression of solidarity. In the past these assemblies were feared by authority, including the monarchs and nobility. They were called by the influential sections (not necessarily the wealthiest) of the village. The decisions at the assemblies were supposed to be morally binding on members of the community. In modern Assamese history, these assemblies were symbolically resurrected by leaders in the anti-colonial struggle in the early and mid twentieth centuries, the agitators during the 1970s and 1980s, the radical Assamese nationalists during the latter part of the 1980s and early 1990s and later, by the human rights movement and organizations in the 1990s. In 2004, the *raij mel* were resurrected in certain districts in order to call for a referendum on Assam’s right to self-determination and the armed struggle (Lachit Bordoloi, personal communication 2004)
elsewhere in the world – displayed contradictory attitudes to colonial rule. While some saw the benefits of modernisation and capitalist growth, others believed that colonialism was an unjust system and self-rule and democracy were the right of any colonised people. Influential sections of the Assamese elite, such as the literary icon – Laxminath Bezbaruah – were critical of colonial rule and took part in the re-invention of a nationalist tradition that would counter the hegemonic vision of the times (Guha 1977). This nationalist tradition was ambivalent about many things. While it was critical of colonial rule, it had no coherent path for the post-colonial period. Leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi and others among the middle class Assamese felt that it was best to throw in their lot with a post-colonial order within India where they enjoyed federal rights. Others, such as Ambikagiri Roy-Choudhury were more circumspect about joining any post-colonial order where the rights of “natives” or “sons of soil” were not taken care of. He formed the Assam Sangrakhini Sabha whose main concern was the unchecked inflow of people from other provinces of the British Indian sub-continent. With aggressive settler political lobbies asking for the rescinding of the (largely ineffective) line system, especially quasi-religious preachers like Maulana Bhasani, sections of the Assamese middle class called for the need to defend the homeland against foreign incursions. When the settlements continued after the transfer of power in 1947, this ambivalence gave way to an outright feeling of betrayal. This radical (albeit marginalised in the political scenario) soon called for the right for Assam to secede from India, if the Indian federal system was incapable of understanding its needs (Phukan 1996: 118-120). This therefore was the building block of Assamese separatism and the genesis of the movement for self-determination. It was
made coherent by disparate elements that banded together against immigration and inadequate federal powers.

These elements crystallised in the Assam agitation that began as an innocuous demand for an enquiry into the upgrading of the voters’ list of a parliamentary bye-election in Mangaldai in 1979. The All Assam Students Union (AASU), already galvanised by anti-settler mobilisation in the 1960s, led a six year struggle, marked by unprecedented violence, against the state. Initially, the demands were simple: “evict illegal foreign nationals”. This led to a long “civil disobedience” movement by an AASU led front. The movement drew upon a longer feeling of neglect and impoverishment and also stoked severe anti-settler sentiments, evidenced in the massacres of Nellie and Gohpur, where ethnic clashes claimed hundreds of lives. The state seemed to have lost its credibility entirely, as ethnic groups battled each other and the state. The Assamese middle class, undoubtedly played a role in managing the movement, as is evident from the fact that it was a student-led movement, but its rather narrow agenda for “eviction of illegal immigrants” found some echoes among the rural masses simply because at some deep level, indigenous people in the villages were feeling the effects of state policies that had run roughshod over their livelihoods. This was perhaps one of the main reasons that the movement could be sustained despite the brutal state repression. It was during the course of the agitation that other, more radical groups began to occupy a prominent place in the Assamese nationalist discourse. Groups such as Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chattra Parishad (AJYCP) with its avowed commitment to build “communism on a nationalist base” and secure the right to self determination and dual citizenship for the people of Assam (AJYCP 1991: 6) began to articulate a new constellation of identity politics in the
Brahmaputra valley, especially among the Assamese youth. It was from this nationalist base that a more radical armed alternative was floated by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Though the organisation started in 1979, it shot into prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with its own brand of radical nationalist discourse (Baruah 1999: 148-154). Many of ULFA's leaders had participated in the Assam agitation but aligned themselves with the radical voice for self-determination. In effect, their ideological affinity to a somewhat unreconstructed Maoist "line", served to defuse local angst over the issue of "foreigners" and "sons-of-soil" (Mishra 1991). In Nagaon, this helped redefine lines of solidarity. In effect, it brought poor settlers and sections of the radical Assamese rural community together. Says, Bora, a student and community leader from Juria:

"...Electoral politics has actually failed in this region. From 1990 to 1994, the national liberation movement gained ground in this area. One of the outcomes of this movement has been the feeling of unity among the common indigenous people and the poor settlers. Both communities even came together under the aegis of the radical nationalists and participated in some social activities together and in a collective manner. But, after the police and military crack down on the national liberation movement this communitarian unity has become meaningless". 97

Bora himself participated in many of the community projects that brought together Assamese youth and settlers, especially those who were rendered vulnerable because of a lack of means to articulate their grievances in a larger political set up. However, these

97 Interview with Pranabjyoti Bora, February 21, 2004: Juria.
measures were not enough to ensure lasting ties between indigenous people and settlers. It was, for obvious reasons, an attempt at social and political engineering within an over-determined contradiction between settlers and indigenous people. To explain further, in a district such as Nagaon, the sustained anti-immigrant campaign was capable of explaining larger issues of deprivation only to a particular extent and not more. The Assam agitation lay bare the claims that indigenous demands as citizens of a nation were bound to matter more than that of immigrants. Assam's political dilemma and its polity's quest for resolving identity issues within a "republican" framework seemed a bit far-fetched. Therefore, ULFA appealed also to a sense of the past, the mythical "point of contact" between the imagined Assamese nation and colonial India. The enactment of the Treaty of Yandabu re-appeared in its modern, corporeal form in wall writings that screamed "Indian Colonialism Go Back". The organisation's radical, albeit somewhat simplistic message to recognise larger enemies and subsume petty ethnic quarrels for the larger struggle for national issues ensured its growth among different sections of Assamese society, including descendants of indentured workers, plains tribals and significantly, Bengali-speaking immigrant communities (Misra 2000: 147-148). Even though the media, academics and counter-insurgency experts have consistently questioned the organisation's commitment to liberation, socialism and a solution to the ethnic issues and despite the fact that successive military organisations have made ULFA

98 The walls in the Northeast are adorned with far from subliminal messages with both state and civil society actors trying to get their message across. In the 1980s and 1990s, when the presence of the state and its surveillance were weak, rural Assam, along with other parts of the region was awash with political graffiti "Khasi by Blood, Indian by Accident" is one that sums up ethnic disquiet in the province of Meghalaya among the ethnic Khasi majority. Another sample "We Demand an Autonomous State" in Karbi Anglong is more focused on goals. Today, the state has realized the importance of wall writing. In the early days of army operations, one of the first acts that the army undertook was to whitewash pro-ULFA graffiti and paint in its place "ULFA is Cancer in Assam" and "Army, Friends of Assam". Taking the cue from the army, the local administration's department for publicity and advertisement have now posted huge billboards with anti-insurgency messages in Assam
a shadowy body not entirely in tune with political activities, the organisation continues to cast a defining break in Assam's ethnic politics. To a large part its success and subsequent staying power can be attributed to its activities in districts like Nagaon, where it carried out almost quixotic campaigns, which surprisingly survived the test of counter-insurgency. In these cases, though the discourse was “national liberation” and “swadhin Asom” (Free Assam), the oeuvre of its activities in the field were poignantly local. It appealed to local problems and fuelled the solutions with a dose of ideological and military capacity. In Srimala/ Gospara, members of the Kolong Kopili Unit99 of the organisation convinced the local people that the state was not working for them. It encouraged public works and community ownership; conducted free labour and medical camps; started libraries and developmental activities and most importantly fostered a deep-rooted local interest in local issues. However, several drastic executions and torture, the unit disbanded in 2000. Almost immediately, some of the erstwhile rebels began to acquire contracts and grants for conducting enterprises in the very areas that they sought to liberate. Unlike surrendered militants100 in other parts of Assam, the members of the Kolong-Kopili Unit have not joined hands with counter-insurgency agencies in the hunt for their former comrades.

99 One may see three broad trends working within ULFA. The first is the “revivalist” trend that seeks to re-discover Assam’s eastern history and culture. This was marked in the organization’s early communiqués from ‘Doi-kao-rong’, mythical base camp bearing a very Tai/ Singpho name. The second trend is a “broad left-democratic” trend, based on local level politics of engagement. ‘Kolong-Kopili Unit’ symbolically links the members of central Assam’s different communities together. The third is the “militaristic” trend that reiterates the fighting capabilities of the people of Assam. Frequent media allusions to so-called ‘28th Battalion’, said to be a crack-commando unit of the organization, are a marker of the militaristic trend. Interestingly, ‘Doi-kao-rong’ no longer exists as a telling marker of belonging in ULFA communiqués. The ‘Kolong-Kopili Unit’ disbanded after the decimation of its leadership in counter-insurgency operations in 2000. Only ‘28th Battalion’ makes its presence felt in military engagements and explosions attributed to it by the national media and the counter-insurgency experts.

100 Surrendered militants from ULFA are referred to as SULFA and have become a powerful social group in their own right. They are often used by counter-insurgency bodies like the army and police to hunt ULFA activists and their sympathisers. They have also been accused of indulging in “secret killings” of ULFA activists’ family members and their sympathisers all over Assam. SULFA members are associated with living a lavish lifestyle, which local villagers and people they once asked shelter from, find insulting and unbearable.
The distance between Hanlokrok and the district headquarter of Karbi Anglong (Diphu) is quite immense when one considers that the means of communication are potholed roads that skirt North Cachar Hills (on one side) and Nagaon on the other. There is also the railroad, with the nearest railhead being the Hojai station (in Nagaon district). This sums up the metaphoric distance between the centre of power of the autonomous district council, and the areas that it is supposed to administer. In Hanlokrok, the major markets and trading centres are not located within the district of Karbi Anglong but in Nagaon, where indigenous farmers and traders take their surplus over the week. The small local mart in the village mainly draws a handful of Bengali-speaking cattle traders and some local farmers who sell rice and vegetables. Locally brewed alcohol is available in the corners of the market and most males find their way to the make-shift bars for a drink. There are many weaving units in the different enclaves, where Dimasa and Karbi women weave traditional shawls, scarves, bags and sarongs. These items are not sold in the market and find their way to the state capital (Guwahati) and other big towns where they are sold at almost double the price at which they are purchased from the local women. The local bamboo forests have been depleted to private groves owned by Karbi and Dimasa households alike.

On June 1, 2002 local villagers joined local civic organisations protesting against the rape of three minor girls in nearby Dikhlem. The protests were directed at members of the Indian army who were alleged to have committed the crime during a routine

---

101 "Karbi Anglong erupts over rape", The Assam Tribune, June 2, 2002. Dikhlem is Karbi Anglong district and was also the centre of a conflict between indigenous Karbis and Hindi-speaking settlers. It is situated approximately twenty kilometers from Hanlokrok but it takes almost an hour to get there by road.
cordon and search operation (NPMHR, MASS et al. 2002). The protests were timed with heightened security operations in the district following clashes between powerful Hindi-speaking settlers and Karbis, where it was alleged that members of the ethnic Karbi militia – UPDS – had been instrumental in the killings of settler farmers and those (Hindi and Nepali-speaking settlers) who had strayed far too often into the grazing and forest reserves. Though the obvious targets of the protests were the Indian army, many in Hanlokrok village also held the district authorities responsible for their failure to act upon (what was widely perceived as) the growing assertions of the settlers. Some even said that the district authorities were turning a blind-eye to the “encroachment of indigenous lands” and “(thereby) leaving no option but retaliation”. In such a charged situation, the presence of ethnic militia within the village was affirmation of the administration’s geographical distance from Hanlokrok.

This is not to suggest that the Karbi militia was running the day-to-day activities, orchestrating civic protests and effectively taking over the reins of administration in the village. In fact, they were largely invisible, though much spoken about in the course of conversation. The protests against the army actions were offset by an undercurrent of anger against settlers in the neighbourhood. For a few weeks since the protests few no Bengali, Nepali or Hindi-speaking persons appeared in the weekly market for fear of being assaulted. Mubarak, a cattle trader and seedling supplier and a resident of Longjapi area said:


103 Interview with local Dimasa farmer (name omitted) in Hanlokrok market (December 4, 2003: Hanlokrok).
"...(of course) we were scared. There was no police, no army and most certainly no-one to stop some local badmaash (miscreants) from assaulting us. Those days, if one was a non-tribal, it was difficult to enter Hanlokrok and we lost lot of money because we were unable to buy and sell cattle. The administration said that we should go to other markets that were safer, but there too the situation was the same..."

Mubarak Ali

People like Mubarak were old settlers, if they could be classified as such, in the area and had come there from Nagaon almost twenty years ago. The markets that he refers to are those that are supposed to be supervised by the autonomous councils. Traders like him are even more afraid because they also have an interest in the bamboo trade. Through a series of contacts, people like Mubarak (in connivance with other local actors) are also suppliers of bamboo and timber to contractors. Although Mubarak claims that the bamboo is strictly “grown in private plots”, he also acknowledges that he has no way of verifying the plots where the bamboo comes from. This part of the problem that local indigenous people keep referring to – one of complete abdication of the administration in matters of everyday governance – and it is almost logical that the militia would seek to intervene at this stage. This structural distance between the administration’s ability to control the markets and daily politics and the complexity of connivance/ inter-linkages between different actors at the local level, is the perfect setting to analyse the reasons why and how events occur in the two districts. In both districts, the state’s role in advocating a resource-sharing regime is not immediately evident. While communitarian resources (especially in the Sixth Scheduled area) are almost non-existent in reality, the

104 Interview with Mubarak Ali (45) in Longiap (December 7, 2003).
legal fiction that accompanies governmental codes, clearly shape a larger everyday politics where indigenous people and settlers are left to interpret their positions according to the passions that arise after political events.

"It started off as a movement to protect our identity. When it became an 'anti-foreigner' agitation and thereafter a violent chauvinist pogrom, is not clear"

Arun Borah

Srimala/Gospara, is situated in the swathe of vulnerable upland lying on the junction of two rivers—Kopili and Borpani—both that take an immense toll on human life, cultivable fields and livestock during the rainy season. The westward course of the Kopili leads towards the floodplains of the neighbouring Morigaon district. Earlier, much of Morigaon was part of Nagaon district. During the Assam agitation, the small village of Nellie saw one of the most gruesome massacres of the period. An unofficial commission of inquiry established after the massacre reported that the killings were premeditated and part of a larger cycle of violent attacks and counter-attacks (Mehta Commission 1985). The memories of such violent activities are not on the surface of everyday relations in the village; rather, they form a backdrop against which pathways between ethnic groups can

---

105 Interview with Arun Borah, a resident and influential man of Srimala/Gospara village (February 02, 2004: Gospara). Borah was a young man during the anti-settler campaign in the late 1970s and early 1980s and saw several acts of violence against Bengali-speaking persons. He was also a part of the radical “national awakening” movement that grew in strength after the student led agitation in the late 1980s. This movement was critical of the limited ethnic view and ideology of student agitation and advocated an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist armed national liberation struggle that sought to unite poor settlers and indigenous people alike. Even after the movement has suffered several military setbacks, in smaller villages people like Borah, who never participated in the armed struggle still adhere to the independentist principles of the movement by advocating progressive collectivism within the village.
be understood today. The everyday relations would make it seem as though the reconciliation between settlers and indigenous people has been achieved. However, the surest signifier of the existence of boundaries between communities is the spatial segregation of enclaves within a village or block unit. Unlike the case of geopolitical concerns of nation-states, where boundaries serve as *de jure* expressions of spatial limits of state control and the contradictory presence of surveillance (Rumley and Minghi 1991: 2-7) the village of Srimala/ Gospara has a deeper division. The spatial boundaries that divide communities are done on the basis of security and cultural attributes. Hence, inhabitants of the village express no contradiction that the Nepali and Assamese enclaves are adjacent to one another. They even mention that their forefathers cleared the forests together and “when the forests were still in abundance, they went for community hunts”\(^1\). The village also has a shrine of goddess *Baxundhori*\(^2\), something that encourages syncretism among the local people. The shrine is looked after by old Bengali-speaking settlers from Sylhet. Moreover, marriages between the Assamese and other tribal groups have also taken place in the last few decades. Such marriage alliances have also happened between Assamese and Nepali-speaking families. As regards the Bengali-Hindu settlers, some descendants of the original settlers like Ram Thapa- a Nepali-speaking agriculturist who also has a small business- say: “the Bengalis are almost like us now as they eat and dress like us”\(^3\). However, the camaraderie does not extend to all settlers unequivocally as local level disputes arising out of personal animosity often takes on a religious colour. An oft-repeated complaint of old Bengali-speaking settlers is that

\(^{1}\) Interview with Moti Das, educated farmer from Srimala/ Gospara (February 1, 2004: Srimala/ Gospara).

\(^{2}\) The shrine is located on a hill about four kilometers from Srimala. Even the “rational” inhabitants of the village acknowledge that its presence has been instrumental in ameliorating long standing fears of recurring religious violence among the local populace.

\(^{3}\) Interview with Mr. Ram Thapa, educated farmer and petty trader (February 4, 2004: Srimala/ Gospara)
their “cows are stolen by the Muslims, as this is their nature”. Such blanket accusations are seldom more than a cover for deeper prejudices borne out of a contest over land and access to livelihood options. Land tenures in Srimala/ Gospara are somewhat typical of the Brahmaputra valley. Less than ten miles from the area are the tribal belts set up during colonial times. Today, much of the land is accounted for as the people there have land titles. However, among the members of the village there also exist a small, albeit substantial proportion of landless farmers. Some of them are Assamese though most of them are second generation settlers. They came to the area in the 1970s and had worked as agricultural labourers in the lands owned by Assamese people. Following the radicalisation of the youth in the 1980s, social relations within the village began to be questioned and transformed. This was the time when educated, unemployed Assamese youth in the village began a campaign to appropriate as much as forty acres of non-cadastral land in the foothills. The land was then parcelled out and given to individuals. Later, some tried to create a collective rubber farm that failed with the crash in rubber prices in the late 1980s. However, this concept of appropriating land for common good remained popular. The village collective occupied more land with the help of radical Assamese nationalists. Those people who wanted to sell their lands and move from the village were encouraged to sell their lands to the collective. This collective land is used by the villagers as a form of security for those who have no land in the village. The rationale is simple. In a region where minimum wages are notoriously fickle and landless people (especially settlers) are left in a vulnerable position, the collective tries to keep

---

109 Banik Sarkar, October 14, 2003 (Srimala/ Gospara). The interviewee, an egg-seller was on his way to Phuloguri market when he made this complaint against his Bengali-speaking Muslim neighbours. The lady of the house where the interview was conducted - an Assamese woman who openly expressed her sympathy for radical Assamese nationalists- immediately challenged him to prove this by asking him whether the “theft” was reported to the police or the village headman. Sarkar changed the subject, but the lady persisted until he “admitted” that he was repeating what he had heard from others in the Hindu Bengali-speaking enclave of Dalimbari.
land for those who don’t have any. For a token registration fee, the landless agriculturists are allowed to cultivate the “commons”. This experiment has interesting anti-private property logic to it. In a larger context where even the so-called protected tribal areas where community ownership is said to be the norm, the overarching trend has been the privatisation of common lands. In a situation where internal forces—such as the work of the radical Assamese nationalists—lend a hand, one may see a reversal of the trend.

One has to qualify that Srimala/ Gospara has had sustained interventions at community resolution of local conflicts due to the presence of radical, left-wing Assamese nationalists. The region was jokingly referred to “Assam’s Jaffna” after the “liberated” area of Northern Sri Lanka, where Tamil nationalist organisations have a parallel administration. In places where the presence of the radical nationalists was less felt, as in Juria, where they could not maintain a base, the situation is different. An overriding feeling of being engulfed by settlers is palpable when questions about ethnic boundaries and pathways arise. However, this coexists with another set of relationships between those at the lowest end of the socio-economic ladder. The “drinking relationship” among tribal households and Muslim sharecroppers are a case at hand. In the contested cultural landscape of Juria, the Assamese Vaishnavite tradition is seen as a possible bridge to incorporate tribals by the older generation. However, the brewing of alcohol remains a barrier. For the Vaishnavites, alcohol remains taboo and its brewing is seen as a marker of primitive and base emotion. The older community leaders argue that Vaishnavism “will allow the tribals a higher status and social standing in life”. Such notions however find no takers among the (largely) Tiwa tribal households in the area.

---

110 Mr. J.D. Bora, retired schoolteacher and resident of Juria (February 12, 2004: Juria). The interviewee is also a member of the Namghar (Vaishnavite community prayer house) committee in the area.
Yet, the brewing of alcohol is an important source of livelihood in a context where most of the land has already been leased out or mortgaged to others. Moreover, most tribal communities see this as a paternalistic imposition on their tradition by those who feel culturally “superior” to them. This leads to a peculiar liaison between tribal households and Muslim sharecroppers, wherein food taboos are quickly rid of by the sharecroppers. It is quite a common sight to see sharecroppers and lowly-paid agricultural workers enter the tribal households in the near the settler village of Kacharigaon during the day and stay on for hours drinking rice beer and sometimes eating non-kosher meat. Noor Mohammed, a fisherman who works for a *malik* (owner) of a boat and lease-holder of a lake, says that “(the) drinking is just relaxation for poor people...the owners and landlords can afford to talk about what is allowed and what is not, but they don’t have backbreaking work to perform”.

On the other hand, with many of the educated second and third generation Muslim settlers, it is almost a sign of prosperity and belonging to be able to speak Assamese both at home and in public. On special occasions such as the death anniversary of the Vaishnavite saint- Sankardeb- both Muslim and Assamese women of Juria wear traditional Assamese clothes and join the cultural procession that sets out from the saint’s birthplace at Borduwa. However, the antipathy towards those Muslims who settled in the lands after the turn of the nineteenth century is palpable. A reason for this has to do with the kind of land holdings that existed in the Juria region even as late 1950s. The land reform acts of the government of Assam were not yet implemented in full and a lot of Assamese families owned vast tracts of lands, much of which escaped the revenue

---

111 This was the view expressed by S. Bordoloi, a Tiwa youth studying in Nagaon College (Interview held on February 14, 2004 in Nagaon). Bordoloi is typical of his generation in the sense that his Tiwa and tribal identity are a source of pride and attempts to entrench notions of superiority by Vaishanavite traditions are seen as uncalled for aberrations. Bordoloi quotes from Assamese history to prove how the “martial Assamese tradition died because of the effete Vaishnavite influence”.

dragnet of the colonial British as they were considered to be religious grants to the Vaishnavite monasteries (Saikia 2000: 46-47). Speaking about settler indigenous relations in the village and in the area generally, Pranbjoyoti Bora, a student leader makes some insightful comments about the class dynamics that govern ethnic relations. He says:

One has to go back in time to explain the relations between Muslim (settlers) and the indigenous peoples of the area. In days gone by, when the settlers first came, they worked as daily wage earners in the houses of our forefathers. They were very hardworking and could work hours at a stretch. In a very short time, they could gain a foothold in the economy of this area. Slowly, a patron-client relationship developed among the Muslim (settlers) and the indigenous land owners. Even as this relationship was being cemented, the so-called “anti-foreigner agitation” distanced the two communities from each other. This distance has not been bridged since then. At the same time, landlords also came up in the Muslim (settler) society. At some point of time, even those working as labourers in our houses became owners of land. Hence, a rich class developed in both indigenous and settler communities. Today, the settlers are much better off than the indigenous people. Our (indigenous) people have not been able to reconcile to the fact that those who once worked in their houses are now rich, therefore social interaction; marriages and so on are not encouraged.113

This past that Bora speaks of is one that is definitely hierarchical and asymmetrical. In Hage’s words it would be the manifestation of an “ethnic surplus value”, where social

113 Pranabjoyoti Bora, local student leader also associated with cultural activities and organizations to promote a sense of secular cultural unity among the people of the village. The interview was taken on February 21, 2004 in Juria.
and cultural diversity is acknowledged only when the dominant groups see themselves as benevolent overlords of the settlers and migrants.\textsuperscript{114} It is only as impoverished and vulnerable retainers in the houses of the Assamese landed gentry that the settlers were seen as benign individuals in need of charity. However, Bora’s accounts of the relative and growing affluence of the settler community in Nagaon need further clarification.

Even though current landholding patterns are such that one cannot see the presence of large land-owners, it is a fact that when the large estates were finally breaking up or being put up in the land market, many unscrupulous transactions took place. These transactions are reminiscent of cut-throat, rough and ready deals that Geiger calls “predatory” (Geiger Op. Cit: 11). While it may be argued that this phenomenon is only plausible in a context where the land is thinly populated and for a region with a high land-man ratio, certain instances reported to the police show that essential features of a “frontier” psyche still exist when it comes to land. In a first information report (FIR) filed to the police by Zakir Hussain in 1997, the informant mentioned that a group of people led by a certain Mainuddin and armed with machetes and spears came to his land in Rupahihaat in Nagaon circle (complete with title deed) where his mother was cultivating paddy and forcibly cut the paddy and caused damage worth Rs. 19,000/- (nineteen thousand only).\textsuperscript{115} The initial FIR mentioned eight people along with thirteen or fourteen others who could not be identified. The magistrate announced a verdict on March 24, 2003- six years after the complaint had been filed. The verdict briefly mentioned the course of the police investigation, which serves as a marker of the manner in which land transactions take place in the frontiers. On the one hand, there is the semblance of formal

\textsuperscript{114} For more details see Hage, 1998 (page 128-131).
\textsuperscript{115} Sessions case no. 184 (N) of 1999. Assistant District Sessions Judge, Nagaon.
rules but in actual practice, these rules play a secondary role to the spirit of “frontier” acquisition. The story starts with a seemingly legal transaction between a tribal landholder- Lerela- and a well-off settler, Sohrab. The names of the seller and buyer are important as the latter’s Muslim name suggests that he is either a first or second generation settler. Were the buyer an Assamese Muslim, his surname would have been included in the police investigation to show that the transaction was legitimate in the eyes of the community. However, the common practice of having a person shorn of any other identity other than his first name, serves to fix his position in the investigative process. Lerela, being an entrepreneur of sorts parcelled out the land and sold it to different people, one of whom happened to be the mother of the accused. The actual amount of land sold to her was 3 bighas. On this point, the court felt that it could proceed no further with the prosecution as the land in question was more than 3 bighas and had a prior “stay order” that was violated by the complainant’s report to the police. The accused was therefore set free and the land in question remained disputed. However, a visit to the locality showed that the plot of land in question was still being claimed by more than one person and in the harvesting season since the verdict, several people had tried to lay claim to the paddy that had been planted. It is this display of rapaciousness that is usually attributed to settlers in a “frontier” though it must be said that they are not the only ones who indulge in land-grabbing. Many surrendered rebels have done worse in Nagaon district, as cases in subsequent sections will show. Such practices however, add to the spatial segregation in the area.

\[116\] A “stay order” in land matters is an order of the court in cases where ownership of a plot of land is disputed. It denotes the final ownership of the plot of land is with the court until it can reach a just solution as to who it should be granted to. Such cases take years to be resolved and as expected, their resolution leave many feeling bitter about the outcome. In the non-legal realm of daily interaction, it means the deepening of distrust and in some cases even violence.
In addition to this, one has to also contend with disaffection within the settler community. With the development of huge political stakes in land and identity, a class of settlers began to acquire more powers over members of their community. Abhijit Saikia, a local entrepreneur, once associated with many community projects initiated by radical Assamese nationalists in Nagaon says:

"...On the other hand, the political leadership among the Muslim (settlers) is quite different and worth taking into account. From 1970 onward, a few (handful) of Muslims gained in wealth and power. Along with this, some of the political parties began to woo these people thereby making them more powerful. There came a time when the Muslim settlers had to take the help of one of these powerful leaders and live under their bidding. The poor Muslim peasant is dictated to by the leader- they are even told who they ought to cast their votes for. This further made these leaders indispensable for the Indian political system. Their rule and powers are handed down from one generation to another. Even though they can develop their community, they choose not to. Instead they keep the poor peasants in poverty and give them only the permanent resident certificate (PRC) and land titles and thereby keep them in bondage. At some point you have to feel sorry for the poor chaps who are literally bonded to their masters. I am sure that they have no intention to vote one way or another but they have to. I am sure they just want the security of a land title without wanting to claim that they are Indians or whatever. But given the political system there is little chance that they can do that."117

117 Interview with Abhijit Saikia, March 12, 2004: Nagaon.
The powers that Saikia speak of, often translates into electoral votes and into largesse for the elite among the settler community. Locally they are known as *mattabars* and it is extremely difficult to pin down their activities owing to the shroud of secrecy around their activities. The reasons for this are easy enough to seek out. Matters such as obtaining permanent resident certificates and land titles usually involve persons from the middle and lower echelons of the administrative set up and also politicians of every hue. The *mattabars* exercise unprecedented control over the community, according to Noor Mohammad, who states:

"...Actually, the social order of our society gives rise to these persons. I mean, this system gives rise to them. Our society is very backward. There are few people who are educated while most are below the poverty line. The poor are easily exploited in their occupational and social life. They come from far off districts and are given shelter by the *mattabars* who then make them do all kinds of work. They are literally bonded workers. The labourers are not properly paid. The farmers are also not given the market rate for their crops, as the *mattabars* appropriate the produce. Sometimes they have to face severe crisis. At the same time, they (most people from our community) are also politically naive and the *mattabars* take advantage of that. They promise the people security and livelihood in return for votes".  

In a sense, the *mattabars* mediate between the settlers and the authorities. This essentially is the source of their powers. Many of them are also privy to local level constitutional authority. Because they work as a semi-clandestine community group and because the

---

118 Interview with Noor Mohammad, December 22, 2003 Jura
settlers are vulnerable in the face of an unfriendly local milieu, the mattabars eventually end up becoming the face of the settler community in day-to-day political affairs. Local disputes and administrative matters are handled by them. Given the overall impoverishment of a majority of the settlers, this reliance on the mattabars also forces the spatial boundaries between the Assamese and settlers further.

Spatial boundaries are starker in Karbi Anglong district, especially when it comes to sharing agricultural land. In the areas where Karbi farmers have traditionally engaged in wet-rice cultivation and have land titles that were given at least two decades ago, the boundaries between ethnic groups is not marked by violence as it is in parts of Kheroni. In parts of the district where people are locked in a struggle over disputed lands, it is impossible to find any areas of shared beliefs- either socio-cultural or economic. On the other hand, cultural and religious events help cement ties between the Karbi and their old Assamese neighbours. In the neighbouring districts, marriages between Karbi and Assamese persons are common and this adds to greater kin solidarity even within villages in parts of Karbi Anglong bordering Nagaon and Golaghat districts. The pattern of land tenure and ownership in Karbi Anglong is different from Nagaon, largely due to the district’s “autonomous” status. According to Bordoloi, the land in Karbi Anglong has four gradations: (a) State reserved forests; (b) District Council reserved forests; (c) Unclassified forests comprising the hills and low-lying forests and (d) Land suitable for wet-rice cultivation (Bordoloi 1986: 120- 148). Categories “b”, “c” and “d” are under the purview of the Sixth Schedule, hence under control of the district council. In category
"c"- viz. "Unclassified forests"- farmers may apply for ownership in the low-lying forest areas while in the hills the forests are considered to be "common" or "community-owned". Jhum, or shifting cultivation, is the prevalent practice in the hills. In the hills, the Karbi society was divided into three territorial groups, namely, Chingthong, Nilip Ronghang, and Amri Marlong. It is believed that in the past these territorial groups lived within three specified regions or territorial jurisdictions. In the plain areas of the district, each village has a definite boundary and almost all cultivable land within the jurisdiction of the village boundary is used to cultivate crops. The villages situated in the hills are further divided into two semi-official categories- (i) villages having permanent sites which are not shifted to the shifting fields and (ii) villages without permanent sites that relocate to the shifting agricultural fields. In the plains areas where the people have ownership rights- an this sometimes includes recent settlers- the district council (or any other government agency) cannot take over cultivable land for any public purpose without paying due compensation. Such provisions are not there in the hills.

The structure therefore accounts for two possibilities where conflicts may occur. Firstly, where settlers have taken over land, by fair or fraudulent means, in the plains, they are considered to be legal owners of the land. Secondly, in the hills, the council is empowered to settle and/or regulate the use of so-called fallow land, sometimes allowing other groups to settle there. This was seen in the mid 1990s when the elected council allowed Kuki settlers, especially those leaving Manipur following the Kuki-Naga clashes that took place in 1992, to come and settle in highland areas of Karbi Anglong. In the reading of events leading up to the conflict between Kuki and Karbi ethnic militia, one

\[119\] Interview with Pobitro Bora, February 28, 2004 (Diphu and Manjum)
can see that the improvement of the economic landscape for settlers is itself a factor that generates violence. In the case of the Karbi-Kuki clashes, it was the marked improvement of the economic status of the Kuki settlers in a region called Singhason Hills that sparked off the conflict. Given the intractable nature of the violence in Karbi Anglong, it is only expected that spatial and emotional distance between people of a village will increase. In Hemari-Timung Gaon, the three Nepali speaking households had established a fairly good working relationship with their Karbi neighbours. However, after the Kuki-Karbi clashes in March 2004, many Karbi families settled in neighbouring villages and this led to some conflicts between the Nepali-speaking people and those displaced by the conflict. This process is reminiscent of Barth’s contention that ethnic groups are made up of individuals who strategically manipulate their cultural identity by emphasising or underplaying it according to context (Barth 1969: vii).

In Hemari-Timung Gaon, the settlers are not cultivators and the land that they are on was first cleared by them under the *Mena* system after which they were able to regularise their titles with the help of the village headman and village council in the early 1990s. In many parts where Karbi farmers are at a disadvantage, the *Paikas* system is more prevalent. It is in these transactions that notions of ethnic grievances or advantages are structured. This reinforces the notion that different land use patterns are followed by indigenous people and settlers, wherein the former are seen to be causing harm to the environment and more importantly, the “exclusive” homelands of the latter. This despite

---

121 Interviews with Borsing Teron, displaced Karbi farmer (April 4, 2004) and Nepali-speaking milkman from Hemari-Timung Gaon, who did not want to be named. The interview was held in the outer fringes of Hemari-Timung Gaon, where the first interviewee had come to get grain for his family living in Manjha relief camp, from the village headman. During the interview, the milkman- a resident of the village- walked in to ask the headman something. He wouldn’t speak about the problems in front of the others, merely saying that “it was fine until the trouble started”. Later, on his own, he admitted that things had changed and that he was looking to sell his little plot of land to someone.
the fact that in reality one may even see the tribal elite follow similar destructive patterns of environmental damage, when they team up with others in the timber industry and land speculation market (Baruah 2003: 55-56). 

In villages like Hanlokrok, the narratives of ownership and homelands overlap in tragic ways. Unlike Hemari-Timung Gaon, where formal land ownership rests solely with Karbis, in Hanlokrok other communities also own land titles. In the 1950s and 1960s, non-Karbi cultivators (mainly Dimasa, Tiwa and Adivasis) cleared the forests and sought permission from the Karbis to settle in the area. Since the autonomous council’s control over allocation and use of land was relatively unstructured, it fell upon traditional Karbi elders to give permission to the settlers. Hence, the sarthe – an old man called Sarthe Tisso (who died in 2001, passing on the titular position to his son, Bonglong) – gave other communities the permission to cultivate and even own land in the area. Until the 1980s, there were no surveys of land and only after the autonomous state demand movement gained ground did the administration begin to demarcate land boundaries.

Contemporary events, including violent conflicts, are somehow linked to such traditional practices, especially when the state’s legal framework takes upon itself the task of streamlining traditional structures into a given administrative framework. In the course of this streamlining, the traditional role of the sarthe is transformed. Where he (there are no cases of women being accorded the status of sarthe) once had the powers to allocate land, today the sarthe merely certifies the validity of legitimate sales and transactions that occur in the markets. It is therefore a common sight to see the sarthe jokingly demand a share of the proceeds from the sale of livestock or timber in the market from those going out to sell the same. The sarthe’s certificate of legitimacy
ensures that the livestock or timer being traded is not stolen property and that its sale or transaction is binding on both parties.\footnote{This causes some problems among aggrieved parties in many parts of the district. Though almost all the interviewees in Hanlokrok vouched for the integrity of the local sarthe, there were insinuations that some stolen properties change hands with the connivance of the sarthes in other markets. Such allegations were made mainly by indigenous farmers who identified members of the settler communities (especially Bengali-speaking settlers) as known livestock thieves. However, settlers said that these suggestions were not verifiable as there were no cases of theft against them in the local police stations. This again was a source of dispute, as those making the allegations said that the thieves remained unnamed because of nebulous links between the settlers and the administration.}

The traditional Karbi line of authority was based on a cumulative social and cultural control over territory. Hence the sarthe of one village, was superseded by the haway of a cluster of villages, who in turn was answerable to the pinpo, who had access to the royal Karbi court and the lindokpo, who is the traditional Karbi king residing in Ronghang Rongbong (the capital of the old Karbi kingdom). With the sarthe and the haway being slowly incorporated within the administrative structure, there was also the transformation of the lines of authority and accountability in the Karbi social structure. By the mid 1980s, the sarthes and haways in Karbi Anglong were part of the government’s administrative structure as village headmen (gaonburah) and in an effort to widen ethnic representation; they (government) also gave a similar status to elders and politically important persons of other indigenous groups. In the event of a conflict between different ethnic groups, this fact is cited as a major grievance by certain radical sections of the Karbi political community (UPDS 2003). It almost seems as if that in the transformation of traditional authority and accountability lies a deeper, more insidious transformation of economic and social relations, where the indigenous Karbi have been at the receiving end of the bargain.
While in the following chapter analyses just what is the policy framework within which the strategic manipulation of cultural identity takes place, it bears repeating here that in the public spaces in rural areas of Karbi Anglong – like Hemari-Timung Gaon – the settlers underplay their status. For a Nepali-speaking person, this means taking on the political beliefs that he perceives is shared by the dominant community. This usually leads him to almost paying obeisance to local authority, such as the village headman or the local political representatives. On the other hand, the Karbi farmers revert back to a notion of a golden age and Hemprek (homeland); to a tradition where the old kin and/or clan networks functioned like territorial authorities or kingdoms; when conflicts about land and resources were unheard of and improbable. The second position is most evident in places where traditional authority has been superseded by administrative authority (as in Hanlokrok). The two positions are further fuelled by the kind of social relations that exist in the areas. Where the Karbi dominate, as in Hemari-Timung Gaon, the revivalist discourse is not as emotional an issue as in the foothills where Hindi-speaking settlers have taken control of the land and resources. In the foothills, in places like Theso-Ronghang, the settlers are hardly the subservient types that one sees in the hills. In fact, they are aggressive to the extent of having powerful local linguistic bodies and student associations. The Karbi Anglong Hindi-bhash. C\textit{\textit{utra Sangtha}, (KAHBCS)}, a student body exclusively for the second generation of Hindi-speaking settlers, has most of its executive members from the vicinity of Kheroni where Theso-Ronghang is situated. Their ties with members of the security forces and paramilitary are well documented (NPMHR et al 2002: 12-16) and members of the student organisation ceaselessly mobilise to include their representatives in both the District Council and state assembly.
One of the oft-repeated grouses is the “preferential treatment that is given to tribals”.\textsuperscript{123}

The KAHBCS along with its sister body, Karbi Anglong Hindi-Bhashi Sanghta (KAHBS), have also demanded the rescinding of rules that protect forests from encroachment, land-titles for settlers in disputed areas and increased paramilitary presence to ensure the security of the settlers.

The indigenous response to migration has been sustained over a hundred years. It has taken different forms, from the peasant rebellion at Phuloguri in Nagaon, in the pre-colonial period to ethnic clashes in Karbi Anglong in the twenty-first. The responses, almost always have had the potential to be violent. Unlike certain other indigenous protests, notably in central India where protests were “quiet” and relied mainly on messianic figures for support (Das Gupta 1989),\textsuperscript{124} the protests in Assam were not centred on one person. They involved peasants, workers and subsistence farmers whose livelihoods were disrupted by colonial intervention and immigration.

\textsuperscript{123} Mr. Brajesh Chauhan, is a central executive member Karbi Anglong Hindi-Bhashi Chattri Sangh. He was interviewed on November 12, 2003 in Kheroni (Karbi Anglong). Mr. Chauhan, is a second generation Hindi-speaking resident of the area and is extremely upset about the government’s policies with regard to “anti-national terrorists”. He associates most of the tribal and Assamese people of harbouring secessionist/ anti-India sentiments and rhetorically wonders why they are treated with such patience by the government. He resents the fact that patriotic Indians like himself are not given due attention. Although he did not mention the political party of his choice, saying instead that he “votes and helps the party that helps settlers”, he clearly shares the world view of the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

\textsuperscript{124} Das Gupta writes that during the height of World War I, Oraon society underwent profound changes in their social and political life. Dispossessed of their lands and forced into indentured servitude, the society began to invoke spirits and messianic figures to combat the landlords who oppressed them. The persona of Jatra Oraon, a soothsayer who asked the Oraon community to “pull out” the ghosts from within, was central to this movement that took place in and around modern Ranchi (in central India). Jatra Oron’s ghosts “appeared” in the medium of dreams and following these dreams, the Oraons were asked to repudiate all signs of well-being and affluence. The movement spread to the plantations in North Bengal and parts of Assam, where the Oraon community were working as indentured labour. These early forms of resistance in the plantations were crushed by the planters as they easily infiltrated and neutralized any potential threats to the system. Tribal resistance outside the regimented plantations was otherwise a very violent affair.
In Karbi Anglong, the first recorded protests were not against immigrants and settlers but against "feudal oppression". While one might argue that feudalism, in the Marxian sense of the word was not entrenched in Karbi Anglong, the reading of progressive Karbi history has today acquired a language of "stages" that is a product of sustained Leftist mobilisation in the region. The Leftist mobilisation was actually focussed on issues of political and civil rights for the district and not so much on settlers and migration. Since 1980s, students in Karbi Anglong had been pressing for an autonomous state, a demand that had adequate constitutional precedence as the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram were carved out of the colonial province of Assam by constitutional edict and rules. These rules were "offered" to all hill areas and tribes living in the province and Karbi Hills and North Cachar Hills remained within Assam. The arguments for the two districts remaining with Assam are rooted in constitutional history. The proposition that "backward tribes" reside in the hills shows the residues of colonial notions of which subjects are categorised as "primitive". Nevertheless, even if one bestows the proverbial "benefit-of-doubt" to the committee for this, it still does not address the issue of who constitute "tribal" groups. Implicit in this problem is the issue of marginalisation and impoverishment, as well as the working through of a cultural dynamic in a region where identity is a matter of life, death and most importantly-livelihood.

There seems to be a pattern to ethno-nationalist demands in the Nagaon and Karbi Anglong. What links them together is the lack of an institutional setting to handle these

---

125 The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) "Liberation" has a sizable presence in the district. At one time, it was the backbone of autonomous state movement but gradually lost its control due to splits and defections. However, the language it introduced into political life remains in use by all shades of political opinion today.
demands. Most political demands for self-determination are centrally linked to the idea of a distinct identity of an ethnic group. The manner in which this identity consciousness is articulated is precisely the subject of discussion. It is against this backdrop that much of what appears as guarantees of autonomy compatible with the aspirations of given groups of people within the framework of the constitution, or even within international law, can actually be seen as a condensed body of intricate political negotiation. In essence, these negotiations are supposed to appear as processes that lead to further democratisation of society and politics. In the Indian context, this idea was supposed to form the core of the federal ethos of the republican tradition. Hence, provisions like the Sixth Schedule, and even the recent Panchayati-Raj Bill are seen as efforts to ensure the devolution of powers of administration and governance to the grassroots. In each case, legislative, resource mobilisation and executive powers are supposed to somehow address the complex web of people’s aspirations. Yet in the manner in which they filter down, they are leave more questions than answers in their wake. One senses the overwhelming assertion of the concerns of the (centralised) state in losing its locus as the sovereign font of law and administrative processes. Indian democracy’s defined by its constitution, inasmuch as it is defined by a particular notion of the rule of the “majority”. On one hand, a ‘statist’ view asserted that it was the individual citizen, rather than seemingly amorphous collectives, who were the backbone of the state. This view harked on the tensions between notions of citizenship and that of communitarian collectives and reiterated that the state “was above all gods”.126 This view that the individual’s loyalties as a citizen of the state supersede her or his loyalty to other identities is constantly being challenged by a second discourse that is articulated against the backdrop of inadequate representation in

126 G B. Pant, cited in the Constituent Assembly Debates- Vol VII, p 865
matter of governance and administration. It would be tempting to see the persistence of primordial identity in the shaping of demands for autonomy in such a situation. Perhaps it would help to see some semblance of political leverage at work here. Even when it comes to voting in the case study areas, there is a clear difference in who people vote for and for what reason. In predominantly Assamese enclaves in Nagaon, one finds blue, white and red flag of the regional Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), a regional party that came to power following the Assam agitation. It was formed by many of the student leaders of the Assam agitation and remains a strong proponent of regionalism in the Northeast. In settler enclaves one finds the proliferation of Congress signs and symbols. The party is associated with ideas of national identity and is also perceived to be sympathetic to the cause of minorities and settlers. In Karbi Anglong the indigenous people traditionally have voted for the Congress as it was the only big party in the scene. However, with the growth of the autonomous state movement and formation of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), it is this party that garners the indigenous votes during elections.127

The definitions of an indigenous collective self, is meant to challenge a “settler” nation state. In both cases, indigenous cultures within post-colonial societies find themselves excluded from the decision processes that central to the state. Their subsequent declaration for separation from a “mother body” is based on an implicit declaration of people-hood based on genealogy and descent ties function “not only as other sub-national units do in, say, the assertion of ethnicity, but point to the history of

127 Electoral politics are notoriously fickle and often many factors come into play in the election of one candidate or the other. In Assam, the AGP was voted out of power in 2001 and replaced by a Congress government. One of the major reasons why the AGP lost was attributed to its unremarkable acquiescence to repressive counter-insurgency policies of the government of India during its tenure.
pre-contact and raise questions about legal and moral legitimacy of the present national formation” (Murray 1997: 11). In this significant development, one sees that ethnicity and notions of ethnic contiguities begin to change almost as soon as the community sees itself as the purveyor of a smaller national space. In just a matter of two or three decades, the organic solidarity of the groups classified as plains tribes, against caste Assamese society changes to one of mutual distrust and competition between groups who are placed on the same social and economic plane. On the other hand, under certain conditions, they also engender ties that would have been impossible to think of within the parameters of mainstream politics. The threat and reality of bearing arms for the community therefore can also be read as instrumental functions of violence where it is an expression of the failure of state to either provide security or to protect the lives of multi-ethnic communities in conflict with one another (Keen 2000: 31-33).

If there is some reconciliation, as is seen in villages like Srimala, it has hardly been due to the presence of institutions of the state. It is through the practice of participation in common goals and earlier memories have been reconstructed. The anti-settler violence in the 1980s produced events like the Nellie massacre and as expected, in the reconstruction of social and political relations between communities, there is a reaffirmation of notions of human rights where repentance and forgiveness are played out (sometimes) by compulsion (Derrida 2001: 28). However, this occurs within a particular context, where the institutions of the state play an important role. Where the state is challenged by the use of violence by other actors, it becomes less inclined to view non-militaristic solutions to the issues that structure the conflict (Baruah 2005: 145-160).
The following chapter explores the other violent environments that work upon relations between different ethnic groups in the two districts. It tries to explain what prompted the intensity of the violence against settlers in the 1980s in Nagaon, and why it seems to be quieter now. It looks at the methods adopted by the state and non-state actors in their effort to address the issues arising out of demographic change and politicisation of ethnicity. Similarly, it seeks to compare the outcome of autonomy arrangements in Karbi Anglong district and see whether it results in more equitable sharing of power and resources there. It also concentrates on some of the efforts taken by the state to evolve (in its view) a more modern system of administration by working on and transforming traditional authority and systems.