Language is not only a means of communication, but it is also an indispensable tool for all social existence. It is a prime factor in creating the sense of nationhood. In few rare cases as in Switzerland the role of language, which is at the very root of nationhood, is so significant that language proved to be an outstanding means of knitting together separate groups into a nation. However, the complexity and sublimity of India's ethnic and linguistic situation is probably unparalleled in any country in the world. In Independent India the language issue emerged as one of the most intransigent problems. In the wake of the reorganisation of the states on linguistic basis in 1956, a number of unilingual states were carved out in India. But even this operation could not solve the acuteness of the linguistic problem. And this fact was acknowledged by the Commission itself. 'The scheme of redistribution of state boundaries which we have recommended will result in many cases in bringing together people speaking a common language. To that extent, it will reduce the number of linguistic minorities. It is, however, quite evident that even if the linguistic principle were applied very rigidly the problem of linguistic minorities will by no means be solved'. However, the linguistic formation of states can be identified as a major gain of the democratic
movement as far as the national problem in India is concerned. Even this has been effected shabbily as can be seen from problems that linger even now. Thus we find the national problem remains unsolved leading to the emergence of various problems like communalism, separatism and linguistic chauvinism both at the state and regional levels. This study is an attempt to understand the Language Question in Assam against its historico-theoretical perspective.

Assam's language problem is no doubt peculiar in the sense that it is complicated by a multitude of languages and dialects spoken by its people, yet it has hardly been studied in depth and properly analysed. This study is an humble effort in this direction. Although, Assam is the home of many languages this study is designed to focus on the dynamics of the relationship between Assamese - the language spoken by the majority of the people in the state, and Bengali - the singlemost important language of the minorities.

Following demands to introduce the regional language in the state administration, there was hectic political activity coupled with a great deal of misplaced enthusiasm. It is known that some of the states were opposed to the introduction of Hindi as the official language of the Indian Union. At the same time in many states minority language groups opposed the imposition of the regional language. In
the case of Assam, it generated a controversy in the Assembly and in the Parliament and finally it led to a strong language movement in the state. The early sixties witnessed serious disturbances and riots on this issue. The present study aims at understanding this problem against its socio-economic and historical background.

The thesis carries six chapters. Chapter I examines the language problem of Assam in the context of different facets of the National Question in India. The different historical stages through which the National Problem in our country has evolved are discussed at length. In Chapter II an exhaustive study of the language problem in the state against its historical background is presented. Moreover, socio-economic developments under British rule and its impact on the linguistic nationality consciousness are touched upon. Chapter III describes how a persistent movement for the recognition of Assamese as the official language was launched for the first time after independence. Chapter IV focuses the chronological development of the official language movement in Assam. The government of Assam, by and large reflecting the cautious policy adopted by the central government, tried to tread a middle path by agreeing to implement the official language policy. However, the political situation obtaining in Assam during that time was not conducive to a smooth change over. In Chapter V an attempt is made to explore the causes that led to widespread
riots between the Assamese and the Bengali communities in the state over the official language issue. Immigration and its impact on economy, unemployment problem, stagnant economic development etc., have been touched upon. Attention has also been paid to the role of political parties and the press on the language issue. Finally, chapter VI carries the summary and conclusion of the study.

In analysing this problem, the attempt throughout the work has been on analysis and interpretation rather than a mere descriptions of events. The main difficulty in studying this problem has been the lack of sufficient data. Although, a number of scholarly works have been done on the history of Assam (Ref. Gait 1963; Dutta 1958; Guha 1977; Political History of Assam, Vol. I, II and III 1971, 1978, 1980) practically no work has been done specifically on the Language Issue of the state. Most of the works which are available on this problem hardly give any analytical picture of the entire situation. Critical Days of Assam by K.C. Barua, Assam's Language Question by M. Neog and Social Tension in India by G.S. Ghurye - all these books are no doubt helpful to follow the various incidents chronologically but these works left much to be desired in examining the problem objectively.

To circumvent the inadequacy of relevant data and information and to gain a better insight into this vexed
problem, the author had carried out personal interviews and written communications with a large cross-section of the society representing different walks of public life. The comments and ideas received through some of the questionnaires have gone a long way in moulding the perspective of the author on the problem. Occupational data would have helped in establishing the true base of the Assamese—Bengali rivalry, but it is not available separately in the Census Reports. However, with all the noted shortcomings and limitations in getting the required data, we have tried to make an objective study of the problem insofar as practicable. There will always be scope for bringing to a clearer light the nuances of the Assamese-Bengali divide.

The present study may be considered as an attempt to understand the complex question of language in the state paving the way for more intensive researches on the issue. Inspite of the author's best efforts to present a reasoned account based on available data and records, there may be gaps in knowledge and weakness in theory that are inherently linked with the nature and complexity of the problem under study. For errors of fact or interpretation, if any, the responsibility lies, of course, with the author. However, a sincere attempt has been made to present a coherent study of the problem as the author sees it.