CHAPTER - II

ORIGINS OF THE LANGUAGE PROBLEM IN ASSAM

The question of official language for the state of Assam had engaged the minds of the people for a number of years since independence. Several times it was raised on the floor of the assembly and was frequently discussed in the press and on other platforms. During the last few years several states in India decided the question of their respective official languages and therefore, this question naturally assumed importance in Assam as well. The historical, socio-economic background of Assam needs to be studied in order to understand the problem in its proper perspective. An attempt has been made in this chapter to trace the identifiable factors responsible for the origin and growth of the language problem in Assam.

The state of Assam is located in the north-eastern part of the Indian Union, between 23° north and 27° north latitude and 89°46′ east and 97°4′ east longitude. It is bordered on the north by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. Towards its east and south lie Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya. In its western boundary lie West Bengal, Tripura and Bangladesh. By virtue of its geographical
situation, Assam occupies a strategic position in the political map of India. With an area of 78,523 sq. Km., Assam represents 2.39 per cent of the total land area of the country. The landmass of the state is characterised by its division into two distinct natural regions, i.e. (i) the plains comprising the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley and a part of the Surma Valley and (ii) the hilly regions of the north, east, south, and the centre which surround the Assam plains. The state now has a population of more than twenty million with a density of over 260 persons per sq.km.

Assam presents a unique fusion of different racial and linguistic elements. Rarely in the world is the composition of population as diverse as in this region. As a result of the long term migratory flow into Assam, it is linguistically and ethnically the most diversified state in India. The tangled national question of Assam cannot be comprehended unless this historically evolved regional cultural pattern is constantly kept in mind.

Pre Colonial Period

Prior to the advent of British rule, Assam was ruled by Ahoms, an offshoot of the Tai or the great Shan stock of south east Asia. Hundreds of them, who belonged to the main wave of immigrants from the southern part of China, ultimately crossed the Patkeai hills at the beginning of the 12th century.
and with Sukapha\textsuperscript{1} as their head settled down in the plains of Assam. They did not meet much resistance\textsuperscript{2} from the local people belonging to such communities as Chutiyas, Berehis and Kacheris.\textsuperscript{3} They conquered the local tribes one after another. By the end of the 15th century, the Ahoms became the dominant power in Assam. Their power and prosperity reached its zenith during the rule of King Rudra Singhe (1696-1714). The Ahoms ruled in Assam for a little less than six hundred years. In the 18th century, the Kingdom was greatly weakened by internal jealousy and dissension. Civil war\textsuperscript{4} broke out at the end of the 18th century. Taking advantage of the dissensions and intrigues in the Ahom royal family and among the nobility, the Burmese led several invasions into the country between 1816-1824. The Burmese invasion at the end of the Ahom rule was the greatest catastrophe for the Assamese people. As a result of inhuman brutality inflicted in them, the

\textbf{References}


people of Assam valley fled to the hills, to Cachar, to Manipur, and the whole region became depopulated; in addition, thousands of Assamese were taken away as captives. Assam gradually passed into the British hands in 1826 at the conclusion of the first Anglo-Burmese war.  

The Assamese society, prior to the coming of the British, was tribal-feudal in structure. The Indian system of feudalism could never infiltrate deeply into major parts of Assam and did not pose a challenge to the system of government. Hinduism being the dominant religion, the traditional division of the society into different categories of caste existed. Consequently, the dominance of the upper caste over the lower caste continued to prevail. Over and above this, the vast majority was tied to the upper caste with feudal obligations. They had to serve the nobility either in the capacity as paiks or as laguas or slaves. These people, the commoners, the mass of the population other than the Brahmins, the ruling nobility and those Kayasthas and Kalitas who served as spiritual guides to the people who


6. The Paiks were the menial servants for three months in a year and enjoyed rent-free tenure in return of such services to the state.

7. The slaves (or Laguas) were allotted to the royal officers as personal attendants, originally recruited amongst the prisoners of war. For details refer Gopi L., Assamese society in the 18th century, paper presented in the U.G.C. Seminar on Society in North East India, Dibrugarh University, March, 1978.
had no separate entity as individuals and no privileges except to serve their masters. In between the privileged nobles and the labouring paiks there was a stratum of people to which the roots of the present day middle-class may be traced. This group consisted of the junior officers like Hazarikas and Boras who formed a separate social group. They were denied the privileges enjoyed by the nobles, but unlike the paiks, they were exempted from doing compulsory state labour. This Assamese social structure did not change radically with the introduction of foreign rule.

Development Under Colonial Period

The period from 1826 was a formative epoch in the history of Assam. It marked not only the end of the independent and powerful Ahom monarchy but ushered in a new regime of foreign domination with attendant changes. The East India Company annexed lower Assam⁹ and tried to establish its hegemony in Upper Assam¹⁰ through a puppet King named Purander Singh. That experiment having failed, the company annexed the territory and placed it under the

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⁹. Lower Assam comprised of the districts of Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong.

¹⁰. Upper Assam includes the districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur only.
Bengal administration. Assam was administered as a part of Bengal during the period 1826-1873. In 1874, Assam was constituted into a separate province with the two Bengal districts of Sylhet and Cachar under a Chief Commissioner. A new reorganisation took place in 1905, and that was to have a lasting influence on the attitude of the Assamese towards migrants from the neighbouring areas of East Bengal. Few more Bengal districts including Jalpaiguri were tagged to Assam and a new province under the name of Eastern Bengal and Assam was constituted under a Lieutenant Governor. The partition of Bengal displeased both Assam and Bengal and had to be annulled in December 1911 after which Assam again reverted to the status of a Chief Commissioner's province. Under the Reform's Act of 1919, Assam became a Governor's province. Demands for the transfer of the remaining two Bengal districts viz., Sylhet and Cachar (plains) were made again and again by both Assam and Bengal, but the authorities refused to give effect to this popular demand. These new boundaries were to remain intact until


12. This led to a large number of Bengalis to give up the hope of getting these districts re-transferred to Bengal and move on the line of converting the province of Assam itself into a Bengali majority province and constitute a Greater Bengal by importing Bengali immigrants and propagating Bengali language and culture. Many of them even argue that the Assamese language itself is a dialect of the Bengali. Refer, Berua, H., Reflections on Assem-cum-Pakistan, Guwhati, 1944.
the partition of India in 1947. The reconstitution of Assam by bringing in large Bengali speaking areas as also the introduction of English educated Bengali clerks may be said to have marked the beginning of the language problem in Assam. However, for a proper understanding of the problem a look into the British administrative system in Assam is called for.

Colonial Policy

The process of colonization in Assam was aimed at restructuring the society and monetizing its economy to effectively serve the imperial interests. The administration, land revenue and taxation measures were geared to the major task of colonial exploitation.

The process of territorial adjustments and readjustments had its impact on the economic, socio-cultural and demographic aspects of the people of Assam. The most important impact was evidenced on the demographic profile of the Brahmaputra Valley. A study of the one hundred and twenty years of British colonial rule in Assam reveals that they opened the doors of Assam to the immigrants from distant places to suit their own colonial interests. Establishment of the Assam Tea Company was part of the scheme of colonization of wasteland in Assam to provide new avenues for investment of foreign capital. The tea plantation in Assam represented the device of British capitalism.
for expropriation of surplus by adopting largely pre-capitalist methods of exploitation backed by colonial state machinery. The British made enormous profits from the tea industry in Assam. With a nominal capital investment, they kept the profit high by paying abnormally low wages to the labourers brought almost as slaves from the poverty-stricken areas of Bihar, Orissa, and the Madras presidency. Though initially local Assamese people were employed as labourers, the practice was later discontinued due to signs of rebellion and discontent among the Assamese labourers in the early years of the plantation days. Immigrant labourers could be exploited and ill-treated without much impact on the surrounding villages. The British administration, therefore, encouraged large-scale immigration into Assam tea gardens. The following table reveals that tea plantation

Table 21: Growth of Population in Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Per cent growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1871 - 1881</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881 - 1891</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891 - 1901</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901 - 1911</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911 - 1921</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921 - 1931</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931 - 1941</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

labourer has been a dominant factor causing Assam to be the province with fastest growing population in India. Thousands of labourers annually recruited for the plantations from outside provinces, most of whom did not return home, formed the biggest migrant group till then in Assam's population.

The immigration of the Muslim peasants into Assam in the first decade of this century was clearly linked with the growth of jute industry in and around Calcutta by British finance capital. With the expansion of jute trade, the expansion of its cultivation also became an immediate necessity. As the area of jute cultivation in Bengal could no longer be extended, it was thought suitable to grow the same in Assam. As a result the immigration of expert jute cultivators into Assam started. With their superior techniques of cultivation, these immigrant peasants took to cultivate of jute, vegetable and Ahu rice. The acreage under jute in the Brahmaputra Valley increased as a result of this immigration from a little less than 30 thousand acres in 1905-1906 to more than 106 thousand acres in 1919-1920.\(^\text{15}\) Bengal had been the scene of mounting peasant mobilization against the Zamindari oppression and exploitation. Therefore, immigration into Assam from East Bengal

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was encouraged under landlord-imperialist machination. This process had two immediate effects. First, it resulted in the ebb, though temporary, of the peasant upsurge in Bengal and second, it created a situation for a conflict between Assamese and Bengali peasants. The exploiting landlords and their colonial overlords viewed that their interests would be served as long as there was disunity among the toiling masses in the name of language, religion and nationality.

The increase in the migration of Muslim peasants from East Bengal between 1911-1921 was characterised by a gradual spread up in the Brahmaputra Valley. At first the cultivators simply spilled over into the nearby district ofGoalpara, and as late as 1911, the other districts of the valley contained only a few thousand Bengalis, most of whom were clerks, traders and professional men rather than farmers. But during the 1911-1921 decade, the agricultural expansion was extended far up the valley, and the colonists came to form an appreciable part of population in all the four lower and central districts. Only the two Upper Assam districts (Sibsagar and Lakhimpur) remained practically untouched. Most of the settlers came from a single Bengal district of Mymensingh. The table 2.2 shows how the people from Mymensingh came to constitute an ever larger percentage of the Bengali horde moving into Assam from 1911 to 1931.10

### Table 22: Growth of Bengal-Born Population in Assam, 1911-1951

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Born in Bengal</th>
<th>Enumerated in Assam Valley</th>
<th>Per cent of Assam Valley Bengalis born in Mymensingh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Born in Mymensingh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>496</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kingsley, D., 1968 (cf. 16).

One added attraction for these immigrants from East Bengal to come to Assam was the Ryotwari land tenure system in Assam which offered them the taste of a refreshing life of peasant proprietorship in sharp contrast to the permanent settlement system of East Bengal. With their descendants, the Bengali settlers represent a large and permanent addition to the population. Most of them, probably 85 per cent, were Muslim, whereas the original population of Assam was predominantly Hindu with a large tribal element. Thus the influx of people from Bengal was a steady process covering the entire Brahmaputra Valley where no waste land was left requiring the cultivators to plough. This migration had created certain impact on the land-use pattern in Assam. By taking advantage of the Ryotwari land system of Assam and the land settlement policy of the British, these immigrant
peasants occupied large tracts of fertile land in the Brahmaputra Valley. This increased pressure on land added another dimension to the social conflict in Assam. As a scholar put it, 'if the immigration continued unrestrained, would not the Assamese be turned into a linguistic minority in their own homeland - the Brahmaputra Valley.' He further added that 'an open door policy towards migrants, therefore, might be unwise from another point of view, particularly so, when in a small linguistic sub-region such migration leads to the danger of the local community being culturally swamped or outnumbered by another dominant or numerous community'.

Demands for trading, clerical, skilled and unskilled services invited further immigration of suitable persons belonging to non-indigenous ethnic groups such as Marwari traders and the Bengali professionals. As middlemen, petty traders, professionals and clerks, the immigrants in Assam attained a dominant position in its economy. Assam Administrative Report 1911-1912 thus observes: 'a considerable share of the export trade in mustard oil from Assam was in the hands of a class of traders who are natives of the Kamrup district, but almost all the rest of the export traffic, and nearly the whole of the import traffic of the valley is carried on by Marwari traders community called 'Keyes'. Besides these, there were a few Mohammedan merchants from Dacca. It was very remarkable to notice the

18. Ibid.
complete mastery over the internal commerce of the valley which these strangers possessed'. The systematic colonisation of Assam made it easy for the British imperialists and later on for indigenous exploiters to administer the state and exploit its natural resources. In fact, ever since the British occupation of Assam, many of the Assamese had to make room for the Bengali tahsilders and various sorts of other amlahs. Thus, Assamese culture and tradition began to be affected by a clash with forces coming from Bengal.

Dominance of the Bengali Language

Another plank of imperialist policy in Assam was to suppress local languages and set up artificial boundaries for the sake of a cheap and simplified administration. This policy affected the local middle class very


20. The amlahs were the colonial collaborators and social exploiters and they were the Bengalis who were influential with the government in the early days of the British rule in Assam and as a result, in the matter of language controversy, 'it was generally held that the amlahs were at the root of all evils' which occasioned the enmosity between the two communities - Assamese and Bengali. But as Dr. Barpujari writes: 'Not merely the amlahs of Bengal, almost all the officials, high and low, Assamese and non-Assamese, never failed to exploit the situation as best as they could ..... whenever an opportunity presented itself ..... it must also be clearly understood that the amlahs were not the true representatives of the people of Bengal'. Refer, Barpujari, H.R., Assam : In the Days of the Company, Gauhati, 1963.
much. The colonial rulers wanted English educated persons to maintain written documents, files, accounts etc., following the introduction of new rules and regulations relating to general administration and collection of land revenue in Assam. This province came to be occupied by the British nearly seventy years after the establishment of their domination over Bengal. This was how English educated Bengali clerks were brought to Assam by the rulers. The introduction of people from outside the province and the creation of a new set of amlahs appeared to create a gulf between the government and the governed, and it was officially acknowledged that such a situation was not conducive to efficient administration. To quote Cunningham, 21 'The Assamese were slow to adjust themselves to the change and to acquire the education which would fit them to dispense with outside help. The Bengali community grew in numbers and importance. Some settled, others, their service over, turned again home. But whether settlers or sojourners, they maintained their communication with the land of their origin and held themselves as a people apart. And it was natural also that finding the Assamese language closely akin to Bengali they looked on its differentia as mere dialectical variations which ought to yield to what

they considered the more cultivated language of the Calcutta standard. What responsibility attached to them in this matter and what to the inertia of government I do not know, but for nearly half a century after the occupation the Assamese language did not receive official recognition. The British rulers introduced Bengali in the schools of Assam and as a court language in April 1836 on the ground that it was very difficult and too costly to replace Persian scribes who were on leave or left the service. As expert rulers, the Britishers must have known what they were doing principally for administrative convenience. Apart from administrative convenience, it is possible that the policy of 'divide et impera' had much to do with it. This decision on the language question struck a severe blow to the nascent Assamese nationalism and even to the survival of the Assamese nationality. The realization of the threat to the linguistic identity of the Assamese people brought about a new wave of consciousness among the educated youth of the province.

The Assamese language undoubtedly suffered a setback due to the policies of the rulers. The services of the Bengali became indispensable in the government schools, since local teachers were not available in adequate numbers to impart lessons in Bengali which became the medium of instruction. Thus in Assam, as elsewhere in British India, the establishment of a hierarchy of new officials operating in
a new language opened the way to widespread exploitation both social and economic. As Broomfield points out, the initial monopoly of office in almost all the department by the newcomers from Bengal naturally generated ill feeling and deep resentment amongst those for whom hitherto there was no means of livelihood other than government service. The polemic between the Bengali and Assamese language since then had been fairly continuous and symbolizes in many ways the fight between the interest on the one hand of an immigrant and comparatively advanced middle class and on the other hand of an indigenous less advanced and suppressed middle class. In the first decades of this country the Bengali middle class had already produced a big surplus of educated youth who could not hope to be employed in their provincial set up. They sought their fortunes in the neighbouring states of Orissa, Bihar and Assam where their assertion of cultural superiority exacerbated local resentment at their success in finding jobs.

The Assamese language remained suppressed during the whole period from 1835 to 1871. The enlightened section of the Assamese people strongly opposed the use of Bengali language in Assam. The demand for restoration of Assamese as language of education and that of courts was for the first time voiced by Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan. In his

'A Few Remarks on Assam', he affirmed the separate identity of the Assamese language against the expansionist claim of the Bengali and thus it became a historic document in the field of Assamese cultural nationalism.23

The contribution of the Christian Missionaries especially the Americans towards the renaissance of the Assamese literature was indeed unparalleled. In their desire to propagate Christianity in Assam, it became clear to them that in order to successfully develop their religion among the backward classes who were totally ignorant of the Assamese language, it was imperative to take the help of the Assamese language. With this end in view, they made determined efforts to reintroduce the Assamese language. This work of the missionaries brought optimism into the hearts of the educated youths of Assam. Popular resentment over the denial of its rightful status to the Assamese language found expression in various ways. In a written petition submitted by Ananda Ram Dhekial Phukan to Mills, an officer deputed by the Bengal government to report on Assam, he urged, 'the substitution, in the schools, of the Vernacular language in lieu of Bengalee, and the publication of a series of popular works on the different branches of native and European knowledge in the Assamese language..............'.24 Mills realized the formidable obstacles which the Assamese people had to face

24. Ibid.
and in his report submitted in 1854, he stated that just as
'an English youth is not taught Latin until he is well
founded in English and in the same manner the Assamese
should not be taught a foreign language until he knows his
own'.  
To strengthen his point he expressed his view in
support of the Assamese language, 'the people complain, and
in my opinion with much reason, of the substitution of
Bengali for the vernacular Assamese. Bengali is the
language of the courts, not of their popular books and
sastras and there is a strong prejudice to its use. I think
we made a great mistake in directing that all business
should be transacted in Bengalee and that the Assamese must
acquire it'. But surprisingly the attitude of the
government was one of complete indifference. The enlighten?
section of the Assamese people did not keep quiet over the
issue. In May 1872, Sir George Campbell, the Lt. Governor
of Bengal, received a number of petitions from different
parts of Assam for the introduction of Assamese in Courts
and schools. Finally on April 1873, the Lt. Governor
recognised the force of Assamese arguments and decided to
reinstate Assamese into its rightful place in the schools.

25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Assam Commissioner's File No. 471, Assam Secretariat.
the Brahmaputra Valley subject to the condition that 'when a class of twelve or more boys wished for Bengalee it might be taught separately'. The de-recognition of Assamese during British rule naturally caused widespread resentment among the people of Assam. Although, Assamese was recognised as an independent language in 1873, Bengali remained in Assam alongside the Assamese before long resulting in the middle class led movements for (i) adequate share in employment (ii) restoration of the lands under the occupation of the immigrants and (iii) transfer of the Bengali speaking district to Bengal. These issues were basically the by-products of the Assamese-Bengali polemic.

Impact of Bengal Renaissance

The impact of Bengal Renaissance on the life and culture of the Assamese people was very significant. The process which began since the closing years of Ahom rule continued till 19th century. Inspite of their grievances against the linguistic domination of Bengali, the Assamese intelligensia was not slow in adopting Bengali culture in matters of dress and food habits. Hemiram Dhekial Phukan played a key role in this process. He appreciated the true significance of promoting commercial and cultural contacts between the people of Bengal and Assam. He contributed a

number of articles to the leading Bengali periodicals of that period and also wrote his Assam Buranji (or Assam Desher Itihas) in Bengali. The Bengali periodicals like Samachar Derpan, Samachar Chandrika, and Masik Patrika had wide circulation in Assam. Gunabhiram Barua, a pioneer of the new awakening, was attracted towards the Brahma Samaj even before 1857. Contact with renaissance Bengal profoundly influenced Gunabhiram's life and activities. He was one of these few Assamese to be converted to the Brahma fold which was having a great spell on Bengal at that time. A few prominent Assamese of the time including Lakhinath Bezbaruah, the doyen of Assamese literature, set up matrimonial relationship with renowned Bengali families of Calcutta. To counteract the evils of westernization even the orthodox section of the Assamese community felt pride in showing their common heritage with their economically advanced neighbours. The western influence on Assam came through the activities of Christian missionaries, mainly the American Baptist, who championed the cause of the Assamese language and under their auspices the first Assam Buranji (in Assamese) was published in 1846. The first Assamese news-magazine, Orunodoi was also launched by the American Baptist Mission Press in 1846 and it was quite popular with the new middle class. Infact,

they brought about the renaissance in Assamese literature by opening doors to the west. The Missionaries not only liberated the spirit of the Assamese from the bondage of the old world ideas in the domain of thought, they also removed the confines of the language and made it quite suitable for modern use. 31

Re-awakening in Assam

The awakening of modern political consciousness in Assam can be traced from 1853 onwards. The Assamese press never ceased to protest against the employment of non-Assamese in educational services. With the spread of western ideas, the need was gradually felt for the formation of political association and organisation to ventilate the grievances of the people. Assamiya Bhaser Unnati Sadhani Sabha, although it originated in Calcutta with the object of promoting Assamese language and literature, contributed immensely to arousing a sense of unity and a spirit of patriotism among the Assamese. Branches of the Assamiya Bhaser Unnati Sadhani Sabha were set up in different parts of Assam like Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Nagaon, Barpeta, Jorhat, North Lakhimpur and Gauhati. The foundation of the Sarbajanik Sabha at Jorhat in 1884 by Jagannath Barua is a landmark in the history of public

associations in Assam. It had dawned upon the rising generation that even the high offices in the state could not be a monopoly of the Europeans or non-Assamese, and that of right, the natives of the soil should have the major share in them. The sabha also pleaded that due consideration be given to local candidates for appointments in the departments of forest, police, post and telegraphs which were so long the monopoly of the non-Assamese. Language-wise distribution of employees in the Assam Secretariat bears testimony to this fact (Table 23). The interaction with western literature had an invigorating effect on Assamese literature widening its scope and enriching its content. The emergence of the 'Jonaki' in February 1889 ushered in a new era in Assamese literature. As opined by Dimbeswar Neog, the 'Orunudoi' and the 'Jonaki' were practically the organs of the two movements, the former against the usurpation by the Bengalis and the latter for the reclamation of the Assamese after her restoration. Ambikagiri Roychoudhary through his 'Chetna' and 'Deka Asom'

32. In a Memorial to the Commissioner on 14 December 1902, the Jorhat Sarbojanik Sabha pointed out that as regards the employment of the natives of the soil in the services of their province, the proportion in which they have been employed is much discouraging. See, Assam Secretariat Records, Home A, July 1894, Nos. 185-296.

33. 'Jonaki' an Assamese monthly was the unofficial mouthpiece of the Assamese People.


Table 23: Employees in Assam Secretariat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civil Secretariat 1912</th>
<th>Civil Secretariat 1917</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Permanent</strong></td>
<td><strong>Temporary</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>European or</strong></td>
<td><strong>European or</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo Indian</td>
<td>Anglo Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bengalis of</strong></td>
<td><strong>Bengalis of</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>Sylhet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assamese</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assamese</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Surma Valley</strong></td>
<td><strong>Surma Valley</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assam Valley</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assam Valley</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Khasi</strong></td>
<td><strong>Khasi</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-domiciled</strong></td>
<td><strong>Non-domiciled</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengalis</td>
<td>Bengalis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others</strong></td>
<td><strong>Others</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


(two periodicals which he himself edited) contributed largely to build up Assamese national consciousness. Assamese nationalism began to take firm roots and the Assamese middle class undertook the task of awakening self consciousness.
among the Assamese community so that through its mobilisation it could be transformed into a nationality to achieve goals of socio-economic, political and cultural significance. The growth of the Assamese press, the birth of Indian Association, Indian national Congress or similar other organisations in other parts of the country convinced the Assamese intelligensia of the necessity of a broad based provincial organisation to represent the wishes and aspiration of their people. The Assam Association founded in 1903 pressed for liberal reforms and practised a politics of persuasion and collaboration. Assamese students studying in Calcutta directly felt the impact of the national movement and therefore the decision was taken to make concerted efforts to form a provincial organisation of the students of Assam dedicated to the cause of the province and the nation. The foundation of Assam Chetra Sammilan (1916) was an event of great historic significance. It gave tremendous fillip to literary activities and Assamese culture. It played a pioneering role in rousing political consciousness and associating the province with the mainstream of the growing national movement. Ambika Giri Choudhury founded the Assamiya Samrakshini Sabha in 1926 to propagate the Assamese cause. He began to voice through this organisation demands indicating the rights of the

Assamese people, the rights of the children of the soil, against aggression of outsiders. The need was felt for a broad based provincial organisation to represent to the government the wishes and aspiration of the people by the Assamese elite. The Assam Association (1903–1920), the Assam Chatra Sammilan (1916) and the Assam Sahitya Sabha (1917) endeavoured to articulate their unsettled question for a linguistic regional identity. The political activities in Surma valley had begun as a protest against the partition of Bengal in 1905. The Sylhet Chronicle, Silchar-Paridershak and Sribhumi played a commendable role in focussing public opinion. Under the leadership of Bipin Chandra Paul, Kamini Kumar Chandra, Sundari Mohan Das and many others, the valley was equally rocked like any other parts of Bengal on the partition issue, although Sylhet and Cachar had already been separated from Bengal (since 1774) and attached to Assam. The people of two districts, however, because of their historical, linguistic and cultural oneness with Bengal could not appreciate the reality of the existence of a different political set up.

Operation of Partition of Bengal

The partition of Bengal was imminent towards the end of the 19th century. The announcement in 1903 that provincial boundaries would be rearranged, served as an

37. Bhattacharjee, J.B., Cachar under British rule in North-East India, New Delhi, 1977.
invitation to Bengalis, Biharis and Assamese to advance their respective claims. The two main objects of the partition were the alleged 'reinvigoration of Assam' and 'the relief of Bengal'. Nevertheless, the proposed partition was denounced very rightly as 'an attempt to break up our presidencies and to break up our nationalities to divide us and rule'.^38 The scheme for partition was announced in July 1905, and it was to take effect from October of that year. Assam's status as a separate chief Commissionership came to an end on 16 October, 1905 under the 'Curzon Plan'. H.H. Risely, Home Secretary to the Government of India, thus admitted, 'Bengal united is a power. Bengal divided will pull in different ways. One of our main objects is to split-up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule.'^39 The province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, including Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara was constituted with Dacca as the headquarters and Bamfylde Fuller as the lieutenant Governor. Fuller's skilful role was interesting. Like many other British civilians of his time, he too thought that the growing tree of Indian nationalism could be cut at its roots only by isolating Bengali baboos. The

38. McLane, R.J., The Decision to Partition Bengal in 1905, Indian Economic and Social History Review, July, 1905.
prevailing position of the Bengali hold over the governmental jobs in Assam as well as the public status of Assamese provided a handle. Indeed, the seeds thus sown, developed into the vexatious Assamese-Bengali conflict in later years.

The proposed amalgamation with the eastern districts of Bengal was a bolt from the blue to the people of Assam. Jagenath Barua felt that 'Assam proper will secure only a small fraction of the Chief Commissioner's attention ...... and the people will have to meet a keen and unequal competition of highly educated, enterprising and advantageously situated districts for which they are not yet prepared'. The Assam Association further apprehended that under the proposed scheme the historic name of Assam would be obliterated forever and her language would suffer. The Advocate of Assom and Assom Banti, the two renowned newspapers of that period were equally opposed to the partition of Bengal and the Union of Eastern Bengal district with Assam. They criticised the plan mostly on economic grounds. The Tea Planters Associations of both valleys supported the proposal recommending, however, that while naming the new province, in no case, the word 'Assam' for which its tea was known all over the globe should be done away with.

42. Barpujari, no. 29.
The Bengali population of the Sunna Valley vehemently opposed the partition on several grounds. The considered the plan as a deliberate attempt on the part of the British government to divide the Bengali race and intelligentsia like their counterpart elsewhere in Bengal. Inspite of the fact that Cachar and Sylhet were administratively separated from Bengal since 1874, the valley had maintained its cultural link with Bengal and looked upon the anti-partition movement as a concern for any Bengali. They felt the partition of Bengal would cut them off from their kith and kin in West Bengal. The amalgamation of Cachar and Sylhet with East Bengal would deprive them of the privileges they enjoyed in Assam. K. K. Chanda\textsuperscript{43} admitted this fact in the following words, 'Inspite of these serious drawbacks, we have become content with our present position, owing to the special and compensating advantages we enjoy in the matter of education and public service and some other matters probably, as compared to what we might have possibly enjoyed had we continued to be in Bengal.' Evidently, the anti-partition agitation in Surma Valley turned into a popular movement based on \textit{swadeshi} boycott and national education. A major section of the Muslim leaders, however, were won over by Curzon in favour of this operation partition and Assam's merger with East Bengal. The first appreciable Muslim support for the partition dates back from Lord Curzon's visit to Dacca in

\textsuperscript{43} Barpujari, H.K., op cit. Appendix F.
February, 1904 and his open hints that a new province with a Muslim majority was under consideration. The central figure in this shift in Muslim public opinion in East Bengal was Nawab Salimullah of Dacca. The Muslim Defence Association of Calcutta and later Muslim League played a significant part in mobilising Muslim support to the government.

Moreley Minto Reforms and Assam

The Curzon plan did not work for long in the face of the rising forces of nationalism in Bengal. The anti-partition movement succeeded in its principal objectives of unsettling the settled fact and getting the partition annulled in 1912. Assam was instituted as a separate Chief Commissioner's province that included the Bengali districts of Cachar and Sylhet. Nevertheless, the political association of Sylhet with Assam involved serious differences from the beginning. The spirit of provincialism, in fact ran high in both the valleys. The people of the Surma Valley, particularly those of the district of Sylhet considered that a deep injury and a deep wound had been inflicted on the Bengali speaking population by tagging them to Assam having no affinity whatsoever — geographical, ethnological and linguistic. In the Indian legislative council, on 6 February 1918, K.K. Chanda raised the question of

44. Refer, n. 39.
transfer of Sylhet to Bengal in the form of a resolution with the remark that the provincial boundaries were not made on broad and comprehensive lines and with a view to give satisfaction to all. Although the resolution was lost, the movement for separation gained strength with the formation of Sylhet-Bengal Reunion League. Supporting the cause Abdul Karim, a member of the Bengal Legislative Council expressed the view that the artificial relation between Assam and Sylhet failed to produce unity between the two communities. The position of Assam Association, which alone stood for the province as a whole, became all the more embarrassing when Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua of Gauripur, the founder president of Goalpara Zaminder Association, demanded the amalgamation of that district with Bengal spurred by his class interest. The Assamese intelligensia, on the other hand, had a different view on Goalpara issue. The district was considered by them as an integral part of Assam and they feared that it would adversely affect Assam's status in the new administrative set up. The Bengalis living in these two districts came out with a complaint that they had no links with Assam and

45. Imperial Legislative Council Proceedings, April, 1918.
46. ibid.
47. As regards Goalpara a deputation of Zaminders pressed for their portion of the district being transferred to Bengal largely on the ground that land-holders would be better treated there by a legislative council which contained a large element of such persons. For details refer, Assamiya, Assamese Weekly, 29 January, 1928.
that their socio-economic base was in Bengal. The Assamese people, by and large, were sympathetic to the aspirations of the people of Sylhet. Many viewed separation of Sylhet would be a blessing in disguise, for whenever Assamese people made a demand for an University or a high court in the Assam valley, there invariably followed a counter clamour for similar institutions in the other valley, thus giving rise to a perpetual rivalry between the two valleys. 48

The so-called Assamese-Bengali conflict was, therefore, linked up with the reunion movement of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara with Bengal. Sylhet protested against its separation from Bengal when it was attached to Assam in 1874 and since then agitated at intervals for its restoration. This issue came up for discussion in the council in July 1924 when B.N. Chaudhary 49 moved a resolution for the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. Chaudhary was supported by members from both the valleys. R.K. Barua 50 supported the resolution and said that 'we Assamese cannot unite ourselves into a nation with Sylheties. We have not

48. Borpujari, H.K., no.29
50. Ibid.
a different language, a different tradition and ideas of
different origin than those of the Sylheties .....we all
know the Indian national Congress is committed to a
policy of self-determination. I believe the present is
an opportune moment when the wishes of the people of
Sylhet should be recorded'. The inclusion of Cachar in
the same resolution, however, resulted in some complica­tions which made it necessary to return the issue for re­consideration with reference to Sylhet alone.51

The issue since then started getting controver­
sial. Thereafter, in 1926, a similar resolution confined
to Sylhet was passed by a large majority. Meanwhile, the
leadership in Surma Valley got divided on the issue of
taggning Cachar to Sylhet. In the Surma Valley political
conference held on 1 July, 1926, a resolution recommending
the inclusion of both Sylhet and Cachar in Bengal was
defeated. This conference voted for the transfer of Sylhet
alone but this too did not materialize due to the divisive
communal politics, which gained a new dimension with the
appointment of the Simmon Commission. The post-1926 period
witnessed a counter agitation demanding retention of Sylhet
in Assam. The Sylhet Muslim Student Association expressed
their opinion in these words,52 'there is an apprehension

of the district of Sylhet being separated from Assam and united with Bengal which apprehension if come about is bound to irreparably impair the progress of Muslim education in this district ....... they may be pleased to see that the district may remain with Assam and thus help the cause of Muslim education in this district.' In a similar tune, Saadulla opposed all proposals regarding transfer of Sylhet. He was for undivided Assam in the larger political interest of Muslims\(^53\) in India. In line with the changed public opinion, the question of transfer of Sylhet was again brought up in the council in September 1928. Haji Muham m ad Bakht Mazumder and Khan Bahadur moved a resolution to the effect that, 'the government of Assam do represent to the proper authorities that the people of the districts of Sylhet and Cachar desire that these districts do remain incorporated in the province of Assam and they do not seek a transfer of these districts to Bengal'. The Assamese intelligensia were very much against this motion. Kuladhar Chaliha\(^55\) thus observed, 'the main principle on which we are to decide this matter are geographical, economical, and linguistic basis of the area concerned. Linguistic unity is the fundamental principle


\(^{54}\) The Assam Gazette, October 23, 1928.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.
on which this question should be decided. So all things concerned I think we should allow Sylhet to go to Bengal'. The Assamese press and platform were equally vociferous on the issue. The Assam Samrakshini Sabha, the Sarbajñak Sabha and the Assam Association raised demands for the separation of Sylhet. The Samrakshini Sabha raised the issue before Jawaharlal Nehru when he visited Assam in 1937. The problem of large scale immigration to Assam was also put before him. The Assamiya Dekha Dal presented a memorandum 56 to Nehru urging Sylhet's separation. Nehru supporting the claim for the separation of Sylhet from Assam thus commented, 'this is desirable from the economic point of view also, as Sylhet being a permanently settled area fits in with the economy of Bengal far more than that of Assam which has peasant proprietorship. It might be desirable for the Sylhet representatives in the Assembly to take the initiative in the matter'. 57

Evidently, the Hindu Bengalis of Surma Valley favoured the reunion with Bengal on cultural and linguistic grounds and the Hindu Assamese supported the separation of Sylhet in their anxiety to reduce the Bengali elements in Assamese population. However, the Muslim in either valley were more for the communal solidarity which later on

57. Ibid.
matured into the demand for the inclusion of the entire province of Assam in Pakistan. A Muslim league government took power in 1937 and remained in office, except for a one-year interlude, until the close of the second world war. During this period, there was unabated influx of Bengali Muslim migrants into the state and this aroused fears among Assamese and Bengali Hindus that all of the province might be incorporated into the proposed Muslim state of Pakistan. The Hindu-Muslim antagonism took a new turn with the continuous inflow of the immigrants from Mymensingh. The large scale immigration led to a change in the demographic balance in favour of the Muslims with abnormal rise in their proportion from 9 per cent in 1921 to 19 per cent in 1931, and 23 per cent in 1941. In Bermo sub-division alone, the proportion of Muslims shot up from 0.1 per cent in 1911 to 49 per cent in 1941. These facts were sufficient not only to unnerve many local Hindus, but also some Congress leaders of national stature. To counter the influx of Muslims from East-Bengal, Rajendra Prasad, who later became the first president of India, advocated the immigration Bengali Hindus into Assam. Thus an economic issue was turned into a communal one, not only by the Muslim league, but also by some Congress leaders. To quote Rajendra Prasad,59 'I sounded the Assamese on the

subject and they welcome it .... some thought it better to have the Hindus of Bihar than the Muslims of Mymensingh. They welcomed the idea because by themselves the Assamese were unable to bring the land under the plough. But the influx of Muslims from Mymensingh was upsetting the population ratio and the Assamese wanted to retain a majority in the Brahmaputra Valley. The influx from Mymensingh could be countered only by Bihari Hindus to settle down on the land. Soon it became a serious concern for the Assamese intelligensia. They thought that if the immigration continued in the same pace the Assamese speaking people would ultimately turn into a linguistic minority in their own land.

The British rulers in their turn has exploited the situation to their advantage by introducing the so-called Line-system, to restrict the indiscriminate settlements of the immigrants in the Assamese dominated areas. Under this system, a line was drawn in the districts under pressure in order to settle immigrants in segregated areas specified for their exclusive settlement. The aim of this government system was to isolate the immigrants from the local people by compelling the former to live and toil in particular segregated localities beyond which they were not allowed to settle. 60

60. n.59.
The authenticity of the line system as well as the government's scheme and methods regarding the legitimate settlement of the immigrants appeared impotent as strict observance was not maintained by its authorities. The violation of the line system made a section of the Assamese middle class to think seriously of their future. The Assamese Hindus and other local people demanded a rigid policy. They were afraid of losing their permanent or predominant position in the province. The arrangements under the line system did not work well. It proved a dismal failure in restricting the coming of the immigrants and their rehabilitation in Assam. It was felt that the line system keeps alive feelings of separation between the immigrants and the local people. It was not the immigrants alone who suffer from the existence of the line system but the indigenous Assamese are also the victims of the line system. Because of the line system, the richer section of Assamese, money-lenders and the capitalists, are securing lands from the poor cultivators at a low price and made profits for themselves under the guise of protecting Assamese interests.\(^1\) Rai Bahadur P.C. Dutt thus observed that the line system is a 'communal, anti-national, anti-social and illegal measure taken by the government. This line system has been created for the stable advantage of insignificant minority of Zaminders and capitalists and to turn the cultivating class to be the ever slave'.\(^2\) The worthy-support that

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\(^1\) Rev. B. (1941) Assam Secretariat.

\(^2\) Ibid.
immigrants received from the Assamese Muslim leaders was politically motivated. The Assamese Muslim in general welcomed immigrants with the hope that they would be Assamised in due course and would numerically strengthen the base of Muslim communal politics in Assam. The intention of British government was not to stop inflow of immigrants but to inject communal virus whenever possible. They might have probably wanted to keep the inhabitants of Assam divided on religious grounds so that the latter would not form a united front against the British.

Centering round this line system, tension generated in Assam politics. The Muslims demanded its abolition, while the Assamese Hindus and other local people demanded its rigid observance. On 16 March, 1936, Nuruddin Ahmed even demanded abolition of the line system in the council as he felt that it had stood in the way of absorbing the immigrants into the Assamese society. However, his resolution on abolition of the line system was voted out in the council. Maulana Munawar Ali also placed a resolution against the system as it created a gulf between the people living within the same province. On the other hand, the Assamese public opinion as voiced through

council debates, the Assamiya Samrakshini Sabha and the Assamese press were vocal enough in opposing the anti-line propaganda.

The government was not prepared to commit itself to any kind of restrictive legislation, but agreed to call an all-party conference to thrash out the issue. In 1946, an all-party committee with A. Botham as the Chairman conferred on this issue. It argued that an administrative control over the process of migration was necessary for a planned settlement. The colonization policy though initiated by British officials derived its legitimacy from the deliberations of an all-party conference and the approval of both Saadulla and N.C. Bordoloi.

**Cabinet Mission Plan and Assam:**

The task of the Cabinet Mission was to seek an agreement with the Indian leaders on the principles and procedures to be followed in framing a new constitution for an independent India. It was also envisaged that, simultaneously, the Viceroy in consultation with the Mission would open negotiations with two principal political parties, Congress and Muslim league, for the formation of a new government.

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66. The abolition of line system would only mean the creation of a vast number of landless Assamese in their own land without any hope of their future development and expansion. Refer, Memorandum presented to Nehru by Assam Samrakshini Sabha, I.I.C.C. papers, File No.1.4 (1)22,1937. N.M.M.L., Dainik Batori, 12 September, 1933.

interim government, which would hold office while the constitution was being formed and would include no British members except the Viceroy himself. Since the proclaimed objectives of Congress and the League were diametrically opposite, the Mission's task of bringing them to an agreement was a difficult one. Failing to arrive at a scheme approved by all parties, the Mission declared itself in favour of a three-tier federal government with only three subjects—defence, foreign affairs and communications, vested in the centre and all residuary powers in the existing provinces to be grouped into three zones. This provision was there to secure the advantages of a Pakistan for Muslims without the troubles of a partitioned India. 68

The Cabinet Mission's proposal to group Assam with Bengal for creating a predominantly Muslim zone in eastern India, like the one proposed to be set up in western India, was strongly resented by the people of Assam. There was a storm of protest against the grouping plan 69 from all quarters in Assam. It was felt that 'declaration of the British Cabinet proposal does not concede India's full demands, but fomented provincialism and the inclusion of Assam in group C will ruin her culturally, linguistically and

68. Tayyebullah, M., Between the Symbol and Idol Attest, Bombay, 1965.

69. Under the plan, the representatives of the provinces were to divide themselves into three zones—A, B and C sections. The C section was to consist of Bengal and Assam.
economically. Assam should have the right of self-determination in framing her own constitution. Gopinath Bordoloi, the Chief Minister of Assam himself staunchly opposed the Cabinet Mission Plan. In line with longstanding demand of the people of Assam, Bordoloi pleaded for autonomy of the province on linguistic and cultural basis. He insisted that Assam's distinctive identity must continue in the future constitution.

However, the scheme drawn up under the Cabinet Mission proposal was full of defects and contained seeds of communalism. The people of Assam felt that as the provincial boundaries had not been delineated on the basis of language and culture before the election of representatives to the constituent Assembly, it jeopardised the preservation of the identity of Assam. It was felt that from the religious, linguistic and cultural viewpoint the grouping of Assam with Bengal was a blow to the culture and civilization of Assam. G.N. Bordoloi, on behalf of the Assam members of the constituent Assembly, submitted a memorandum to the Congress working committee opposing the grouping of Assam with Bengal. Both the Congress and the League had at one stage accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan and, for a while, a solution of the

communal question without the partition of the country seemed to be in sight. But Assam's determined opposition to its grouping with Bengal provided an opportunity to the League to repudiate its earlier acceptance. This resulted in the ultimate failure of the grouping plan of the Cabinet Mission, for Jinnah would not have it unless he could have it in its entirety. Thus, the Cabinet Mission proposal to create a predominantly Muslim zone in eastern India that would include Assam was rejected by the Congress party ministry. However, with the acceptance of the Mountbatten Plan, the anti-grouping movement died down and attention was diverted to the referendum in Sylhet. On the eve of partition, it was agreed by virtually all political parties that Assam should remain in India, but a referendum was to be held in the Sylhet district to obtain the people's verdict whether it would remain in Assam or would opt for the eastern wing of the proposed Pakistan.

Sylhet Referendum:

The Mountbatten Plan provided the people of Sylhet with an opportunity to decide their future through a referendum. Thereafter the focus of political activity was shifted to the Sylhet referendum. It was virtually a vote on the

twin issue of the reorganisation of India on communal and the province of Assam on linguistic basis. Assamese public opinion remained understandably cold but consistent with the earlier stand. It was a logical anticipation that the Muslims, constituting the district, would vote for Pakistan. While the Hindu community of the Brahmaputra Valley demanded the separation of Sylhet from Assam, the Hindu community of the Surma Valley was vociferous in their demand for the retention of this district in Assam. Ironically enough, these very people, who had clamoured for union with Bengal, were now desperately trying to cling to Assam.

The idea of separation of the economically deficit district of Sylhet from Assam was welcomed by the people at large living in the Brahmaputra Valley. The student community of Assam also held similar views. The Goalpara Branch of the Assam Student's Congress held a meeting on 30 July, 1947 to demand the separation of Sylhet from Assam. A resolution was also adopted in this meeting to the effect that the Britishers had joined Sylhet, a district with an entirely different culture and a different language, to Assam for the promotion of their own imperialistic design. As a result of this union, there had been a clash of rival interests retarding the progress of the entire province. Not Assam alone, but India as a whole had been demanding the demarcation of the provincial boundaries on a cultural basis.
The meeting, therefore, demanded the separation of Sylhet from Assam, which would in no way harm the prestige of Indian nationalism as feared by those national leaders who had spoken against the separation of Sylhet from Assam. The Sylhet referendum was held in July 1947. It was virtually a vote on the twin issue of the reorganisation of India on communal and the province of Assam on linguistic basis. The valid votes cast in the referendum, 50.0 per cent were in favour of Sylhet's inclusion in Pakistan and only 47.4 per cent for an undivided Assam in India. The verdict was quite natural as it clearly reflected the communal composition of the district population. It was indeed a lifetime opportunity for the Assamese leadership to get rid of Sylhet and carve out a linguistically more homogeneous province. To quote Rabindra Aditya, a Congress leader from Sylhet, 'the Assamese leadership, too eager to get rid of Sylhet with a view to carving out a homogeneous province, arranged little protection for the minorities of Sylhet in the free exercise of their united franchise. When the results of the referendum were declared, there was a subdued sense of relief in the Assam valley as the majority of the votes cast were in favour of Pakistan'. In this connection, Ambika Giri Raychoudhury, Secretary, Asom Jatiya Mahasabha, thus observed.

75. Aditya, R., From the Corridors of Memory, Karimganj, 197.
'It is our definite opinion that whatever sense there has been in retaining Sylhet as a whole in Assam, there is no justification whatsoever in the Cachar and Sylhet leaders trying to retain a few Hindu majority thanas of the district within Assam. There is little sense in trying to retain the junior partner of Sylhet, the Cachar plains, at any rate the Hailakandi sub-division in Assam'.

Roychoudhary was, therefore not satisfied with the transfer of Sylhet alone to Pakistan. He desired that Cachar too should follow suit. Leksmidhar Barua also felt that for the economic salvation of Assam and for the maintenance of the other real interests of the Assamese, the district of Sylhet which had been causing a constant drainage on the revenue of Assam should forthwith be separated from the province.77

On the other hand, there was a feeling among the leaders in Surma Valley that some forces in the Assam Valley were instrumental in Sylhet's inclusion in Pakistan. Dr. Triguna Sen,78 thus commented that 'the transfer of Sylhet to Pakistan had already been secretly decided upon and accepted by the Congress High command and also by many in the Assam Congress to reduce the Bengali element in Assam's population'.

Thus the Assamese-Bengali language conflict had some link with the re-union movement in the Bengali areas of the composite province. In fact, the Bengalis in Assam fell in two distinct categories, i.e., the immigrant Bengalis in the Assam Valley districts and those in the former Bengali districts of Goalpara, Sylhet and Cachar. The problems and attitude of the two groups or categories were also visibly different. The early settlers in the Assam Valley came in the wake of British expansionism and indirectly helped the colonization scheme. Besides this the Amlahs, the revenue farmers and professionals in the Brahmaputra Valley did not face the same vengeance of the British during the India struggle for freedom as did their counterpart either in Bengal or in the Bengali districts of Assam. The Bengalis in the Assam Valley were generally under the control of the Rai Sahebs and Rai Bahadurs. On the other hand, the Bengalis in Goalpara, Sylhet and Cachar were never immigrants and these districts were British gifts to Assam. The people there could not reconcile themselves to the new set up and throughout the colonial period the agitation for re-union repeatedly cropped up. A feeling of indifference towards Assam further worsened the Assamese-Bengali relations. The intellectual middle class in Assam Valley either could not or

refused to differentiate between the two groups of Bengalis.
It should also be brought to focus that when the Indian National Congress was reorganised with its provincial units, Surma Valley formed part of the Bengal Provincial Congress and some of the Surma Valley leaders, including K.K. Chanda, were prominent in Bengal Congress. The Indian National Congress worked on the principle of linguistic province and neither the Assamese nor the Bengali intellectuals of the province raised any voice against this policy which stood on the way of the two valleys to come closer and improve the inter-valley and inter-community relationships.

A basic failure of Indian intellectuals during the colonial period was its inability to counteract the divisive policy of the agents of imperialism. The British policy, found and developed in this soil, extensively covered the complex element of caste, communal discords and social obscurantism that would expose them to capitalist exploitation. The merging middle class was objectively opposed to foreign domination over the home market. Hence, they looked forward to establish their own control instead so that indigenous capitalism could thrive. To promote their own interests, these classes rallied popular support behind them by exploiting spiritual sentiments based on community of culture. This happened both at the regional and national level, as we have seen above in case of Assam.

After independence, with the inclusion of Sylhet in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the Assamese leaders became
more vocal about the position of their language and culture and the demand for the declaration of Assamese as the state language in Assam started gaining momentum. The self-consciousness of nationalities is historically constituted. Just as the nation state as the dominant form of world political organisation, in turn, influenced the self perception and expectations of many nations, the principle of linguistic states in India has historically determined the aspirations and concern of the Assamese. Since independence, the desire to be at par with other nationalities in the Indian Union has been a primary concern of the Assamese nationality. The case for retaining Assamese as the official language of the state will be examined at length in the following chapters.