CHAPTER V

THE PRESS AND THE PRESIDENT'S RULE

With the imposition of the President's rule in Assam on 12th December 1979 the anti-foreigners movement intensified. Since the seventh Lok Sabha election was due in the very beginning of the new year, people were expecting a stable Government at the centre. But AASU was against election being held in Assam, because according to it the voters' list contained thousands of foreigners. The Press sided with AASU and demanded postponement of polls in Assam's 14 parliamentary constituencies. Notwithstanding strong demand by the people of Assam for postponement of poll until the issue of foreign nationals vis-a-vis the voters list was settled, the Chief Election Commissioner announced on 12th December 1979 that polling would be held for the three parliamentary constituencies in Assam for which nominations had been filed. These were Silchar, Karimganj and the autonomous district. In the other eleven constituencies no poll was possible, as the candidates who had filed their nomination papers withdrew their candidature. Begum Abida Ahmed, whose nomination papers were filed in Barpeta, had her candidature rejected. On 31st December, the Election Commission announced that polling in Karbi Anglong district was being postponed as the returning officer was unable to arrange the personnel needed for the task. Elections to the two constituencies in
Cachar were held on 3rd and 6th January' 80.

The Assam Tribune editorially said that the Chief Election Commissioner did an "irreparable damage" to the democratic tradition by his refusal to respond to the popular demand not to hold elections in Assam. The election in the two constituencies in the predominantly Bengali district of Cachar undoubtedly enraged the Assamese people of the Valley. The disciplined nature of the movement spearheaded by AASU achieved resounding success in the first phase of the struggle by stopping the illegal and unconstitutional elections in 12 out of the 14 parliamentary constituencies in the state. The Assam Tribune in the editorial "Defeat The conspiracy" said, "Be that as it may, the people of Assam have now a long and bitter struggle ahead, the successful culmination of which will depend largely on maintenance of the disciplined and non-violent character of the Movement. What they are facing is a twofold challenge - the obduracy and authoritarian attitude of the powers that be and the unconcealed hostility of the opponents of the Movement, an organised section of which, as some unfortunate incidents of the last few days have warned, is frantically trying to throw the movement off its rails. It is a deliberate conspiracy against the peace, a calculated attempt to create distraction and confusions that must be defeated by all
The Mujahid, a weekly of the minority community, while supporting the movement against foreign nationals expressed concern at the violence and harassment to the genuine Indian Citizens. The paper editorially demanded official enquiry into these incidents. It appealed to the agitation leaders to realize the paramount need for vigilance against agents provocateurs and all doubtful elements and to maintain peaceful and non-violent character of the movement. The apprehension of the Mujahid came true. The first week of January, 1980 saw Assam in the grip of violent disturbances in the wake of the movement demanding deportation of foreign nationals and deletion of their names from the electoral rolls. Though the sponsors of the movement since the beginning averred times without number that the movement was not directed against any community or linguistic group and appealed for peace and amity among all sections of the people, it cannot be denied that taking advantage of the surcharged emotion vested interests by devious means created a situation of violence and lawlessness. The Mujahid lamented that Assam lost its clean and enviable records of traditional communal harmony and
its fair name was famished by ill feeling and bad blood among various groups.6

The All Assam Students Union was aware of the dangers stalking the path of the struggle and addressed an appeal to the people to maintain peace. But some killings, arson, looting and other violent activities continued in some places, calling for imposition of curfew and flag march staged by the army. From their success in preventing voting in 12 parliamentary constituencies the students shifted their attention to the black gold that flows through the veins of Assam i.e. oil. Picketing at the oil installations to stop the flow of oil from Assam to outside the state continued from December 17, 1979.

On December 27, 1979, the agitators thousands of men, women and children-squatted, stood and shouted slogans outside the gates of various oil installations and refineries throughout the State including Narangi the pumping station for the oil which was despatched to the Barauni refinery. The leaders of the movement conceded that oil blockade affected the Country and was hurting the common man. But they said, without it, you in Delhi or Bombay would never have realized the magnitude of the problem here.7

While the movement was gaining momentum, Mrs. Gandhi
returned to power with a massive majority. She took over as Prime Minister on 14th January 1980. But hardly was the new Government in the saddle when the agitation took a violent turn in the oil town of Dullajan in upper Assam. On January 17, 1980, the AASU and the AAGSP observed an Anti-oppression Day throughout the valley, against atrocities and harassment of public, especially women by security forces in North-Kamrup particularly on 11th and 12th January. On 18th January, at Dullajan there was police firing on the picketers and Dr. Rabi Mitra, the Technical Manager of the oil was dragged out of his car and killed.

The local Press was seriously concerned about violent disturbances. The sponsors of the movement declared times without number that the agitation was not directed against any community or linguistic groups and appealed for peace and amity among all groups of people. But some detractors of the movement dubbed it as communal. In the editorial 'Peace Must-Be Restored', The Assam Tribune warned, "It is clear that agents provocateurs are at work and the corrivance of some foreign elements and elements with extraterritorial loyalties cannot also be ruled out".

But the Assam Tribune did not blame the sponsors of the agitation for the violence, strangely it put the entirely blame on the so-called foreigners. Far from taking a balanced view of
the situation the paper editorially remarked, "The present situation only vindicates the demand of the people for deportation of the foreign nationals and points to the danger of allowing lakhs of foreigners to live in Indian soil. At the same time the people must guard against the diabolical role played by vested interests to create misunderstanding among different communities and groups".  

In Assam the President's rule was in operation since December 12 last. The probability of forming a Ministry in the State completely disappeared nor would it be politically prudent and administratively feasible to induct a Minister now with highly undependable groups in the State Assembly. The central rule thus portended to remain for some months, but that position would not entirely be unwelcome if the centre succeeded in solving the foreign nationals issue and restoring law and order promptly. The Assam Tribune editorially said, "The people of Assam have been willy-nilly placed between the devil and the deep sea by capricious politicians. However, it is necessary for the people of the state to remain steadfast in their objective and conduct themselves peacefully even if there be provocations from known and unknown quarters". 

Soon after taking office Mrs. Gandhi sent Dr. Sankar Dayal
Sharma and Sri Yashpal Kapoor as her representatives to Assam for an on the spot study. The representatives of the All Assam students union rightly told the two emissaries of the Congress (I) that the Prime Minister should visit Assam and study the situation here herself so that she could feel the pulse of the people to enable her to evolve a satisfactory solution to her present impasse.

The previous caretaker Government of Sri Charan Singh was indifferent to the hopes and aspirations of the people of this region. New Delhi sought to impose an unwanted election on the people by force and in the process drove a wedge between Cachar and the rest of Assam. The New Government with a massive mandate behind it was better situated to tackle the problem in a just and fair manner.

The Dainik Assam was hopeful about the outcome of the visit of the Prime Minister's emissaries. Though there would undoubtedly be political pressures to go soft on the burning issue of the state, it was hoped that the new govt. at the centre would not deviate from the right course because the problem of Assam was the problem for the whole country. Meanwhile, on January 21, the BLACK DAY was observed by the people at the call of the AASU and AAGSP. It was spontaneous manifestation of people's
resentment against the widespread police atrocities on man, women and children of North Kamrup and Duliajan and against the oathtaking by two M.P.'s of Cachar who were elected to the Loke Sabha through electoral rolls in which foreigners' names figured as voters. The Assam Tribune also sounded a note of hope when it editably remarked. "In the context the Prime Minister, Srimati India Gandhi's understanding of the Assam situation is heartening and her assessment that the people of Assam genuinely fear of being outnumbered by infiltrators as in Sikkim and Tripura is quite welcome".

The Local press reasonably expected that the Prime Minister would take the earliest opportunity to personally come to Assam and make an on-the-spot assessment to evolve remedial steps for connection of the electoral rolls in the light of the demands of the people in Assam. "What is needed is her immediate attention to the problem and to have dialogues with the people of Assam and the leaders of the movement a desire for which she has already expressed".

Within a month of taking office as Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi invited the students for talks on the foreigners issue. A delegation from AASU went. They included the president of AASU Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta as the General Secretary Sri Bhrigu Kumar Phukan. The Meeting between the Prime Minister
and the AASU delegation took place on 2nd February, 1980. The delegation presented a memorandum listing their demands. Their main demands were:

1. All foreign nationals must be detected and deported from our Country.

2. (a) Names of foreign nationals must be removed from the concerned electoral roll before holding any election Assam.
   (b) Inclusion of foreign nationals names in the electoral rolls in future must be made impossible with the help of an adequate and strong machinery.

3. Border of India with neighbouring countries must be fully protected to effectively check infiltration.

4. Indian voters residing in Assam should be issued identity cards with photograph affixed.

5. Necessary constitutional safeguards should be provided to the people of the North Eastern region for the next 15-20 years by making necessary constitutional provisions for the protection of the identity of the indigenous people of this region.

6. The Government of Assam should be free to reject any certificate issued by the district authorities of West Bengal and Tripura.

7. The authority to grant citizenship certificates delegated
to the State Government should be withdrawn by Central Government immediately from all state Government, so that those foreigners who are detected and deported from Assam do not come back armed with citizenship certificates issued by other states.

8. Fresh nominations must be invited when election for Karbi Anglong and North Cachar is announced after detection of foreigners and their deportation.

But the AASC leaders did not stop at making demands. They made a number of proposals which they claimed would hasten a settlement. They were as follows:

1. The National Register of Citizenship (NRC) of 1951 should be made up to date by taking into consideration the additions to the number of each family since the time of compilation of the Register.

2. The comparison of the NRC with the successive electoral rolls since 1952 will also be helpful in making it up to date.

3. A free zone devoid of trees and houses should be created all along the border and any one crossing it without valid travel documents from either side must be shot at.

Other suggestions included the maintenance of birth and death registers at the block village and town levels as well as
an increase in the number of check posts so as to enable one check post to be visible from the other.\textsuperscript{16}

The local press hoped that the talks between AASU and the Prime Minister would pave the way for some solution of the problem. It appeared from newspaper reports that the problem so long sought to be dismissed as a state or regional issue received countrywide recognition and the Government too reeled round to the view that it was a national problem.\textsuperscript{16} The Prime Minister's own observation in the parliament that the problem could not be considered insoluble showed she was determined to find a satisfactory solution to the problem which had become a life and death issue for the people of the region in general and Assam in particular. The \textit{Assam Tribune} wrote, "It is however to the credit and wisdom of the Prime Minister Srimati Indira Gandhi that while terming the Assam situation as 'delicate' she said 'we should not further inflame matters.' It was expected of all concerned who are interested in defusing the situation and finding a satisfactory solution of the foreign nationals issue to subscribe to the Prime Minister's view."\textsuperscript{17} The outcome of the talks which the AASU representatives would have with the Prime Minister was watched with anxious interest, but it was the considered opinion that it would be naive to expect a ready-made solution of the foreign nationals issue. What was needed
was sincerity and a will to solve the issue once for all on the part of all concerned. Attempts to inject any extraneous factor in the issue might cause inordinate delay in its solution.

The Government rejected the demands pertaining to the cut-off year for determining foreigners. The Prime Minister and Home Minister put forward, during the talks, 25th March, 1971 as the cut off date; while the students wanted the basis to be the National Register of Citizen 1951 and the Assam census of 1952. The suggestion was mooted at one point during the talks that only those who had crossed the border after 25th March 1971 should be registered as foreigners. This was being objected to by the AASU who demanded that the cut-off date should be fixed at a point much earlier then 1971. The Government also took the stand that people accepted as Indian citizens, under the Nehru-Liaquat Ali pact and by the Agreement between Sheik Mujibur Rahman and the Government of India, should not be treated now as foreign nationals.

In a follow up of the Prime Minister's meeting of 2nd February '80, Mr. Zail Singh, Home Minister travelled to Gauhati to meet the student leader of the movement on 23rd February '80. Nothing new emerged from the discussions apart from the widening of rift between the two sides and a hardening of attitudes.
Twice within three days - at Gorakhpur on February 20 and at New Delhi on February 22 Smti Indira Gandhi chose to publicize that the real problem in Assam was that of unemployment among the educated. Though it was not denied that educated unemployment in the state assumed alarming proportion, to describe it as the real problem in the context of the statewise mass up-surge was something that can be twisted by different persons in different ways. The real problem, said the Debik Asom was the vital one of preserving the socio-cultural identity of the Assamese. The fearsome prospect of the Assamese people being outnumbered in their own homeland forced the All Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad to launch the current movement and the local people irrespective of age and sex to come out of their cocoons to the streets demanding expulsion of all foreigners and location of their names from the electoral rolls. The basic issue therefore is not of employment, though the local people did demand a just and fair share in appointments in various Government departments, and Semi Government and private undertakings and establishments. According to the Assam Tribune, Prime Minister's remarks would give a handle to those who were trying by devious means to project the current movement as one against the non-Assamese in general and Bengalees in particular. The paper said Srimati Gandhi's comments therefore are out of con-
text and possibly made deliberately to present a wrong picture of the movement. Her remarks are particularly unfortunate because of the timing when the Union Home Minister was having discussion in Assam with the movement leaders to try to hammer out a solution to the long drawn out problem. ²¹

There was mass picketing of central and state offices, from 3rd March onwards. It was expected to continue for twelve days. On the first day, 3rd March, the newspapers reported that all central and state offices had been paralysed. Cachar was not affected, but the hill areas were to an extent. The same day an invitation from the Prime Minister was received by the AASU. Picketing was suspended on 7th March. The student leaders met the Prime Ministers for nearly one hour on 7th March. The next day, 8th March, they met the Home Minister and asked that the AGSP should also be invited. The Home Minister agreed and appealed for a long suspension, if not indefinite postponement of picketing meanwhile. The AASU leaders agreed in principle. On 9th March, the AAGSP sent an eight-member team led by Nibaran Bora for the Delhi Talks, announcing at the same time a six-day state-wide picketing of central and state offices, starting from 10th March. This was however, dropped. Again and again there were several meetings between the movement leaders and national leaders, including the one with the Prime Minister and also with Zail Singh, but apparently both sides were adamant;
they took it as a prestige issue.22

There was general regret and disappointment in Assam at the failure of the New Delhi talks between the Government of India and the All Assam Students Union and Gana Sangram Parishad. The Government wanted 1971 as the dead line in view of some international agreements with Bangladesh. The deligatlon even suggested that after identifying the non-citizens by accepting 1951 as the deadline if the Government had some difficulty on deportation they were prepared to discuss the issue separately. But the negotiations themserles could not be described as all in vain. They removed some of the misunderstandings that crept into the two organisations spearheading the present movement namely, the AASU and AAGSP. They submitted a common draft for consideration which shows that their basic stands remain the same and unaltered. The assurance of the union Home Minister, Sri Zail Singh, that the Government would not allow the cultural identity of Assam to be swamped showed the Government's sympathetic attitude. The Government also initiated some measures to prevent infiltration. The local press found a ray of hope in the fact that neither side closed the door of negotiations, but warned that delay in finding an acceptable solution would only strengthen the hands of the enemies of the movement.23

Certain quarters acted with fanatic speed and wonderful
manifestation of grip and power with their wit by investing the seed of separatism, disintegration at the behest of religion, caste, language in the minds of innocent people not accustomed with the visions of blood thirsty dragons of the society drinking constantly the supreme nectoer of immortality. The Assamese meaning of the foreigner was interpreted as an outsider meaning thereby any person living in Assam having come over here from outside the state although from within the country. Fear Psychosis was created that in the name of foreigner all the Bengalis, Marwaris, Biharis, Punjabis etc. living in state of Assam would be turned out of Assam, they being the foreigners to this state. A China wall was created in the name of religion Hindus and Muslims and in the name of language Assamese-Bengali and in the name of communities like Marwari, Biharies, Punjabis etc. It is very difficult to assess as to its source, but there was great impact and sense of suspicion on the motivations of the agitators in Assam. People of different communities in Assam were rolling their eyes in bewilderment.24

On 1st April, 1980, Governor L.P. Singh suggested to AASU leaders that 1967 be accepted as a compromise date for identifying and deporting the aliens. This, he felt, would cover the flow or refugees who came to undivided Assam from East Pakistan following the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. But this was not accepted
by AASU, on April 3, the Assam administration issued a clear warning to the agitators to withdraw the oil blockade or face stern measures. The show of force by the Government by bringing in additional CRPF units as also asking the army to be in readiness besides promulgation of orders under section 144 Cr. P.C. and declaration of a half a Kilometre stretch all along the Pipeline route as protected areas was evidence of the Government's preparation and preparedness to take strong-arm measures if the agitation was not withdrawn or suspended. But the local press felt that this show of might would however only harden the attitude of those spearheading the movement. Thus it appeared that a point of no return was reached.

The Mujahid, a language weekly representing the interests of minority in Assam hailed the talks between the leaders of the agitation and the central Government and expressed hope that a solution could be reached by give and take formula. But when the talks sailed, the paper lamented that agitation leaders were indifferent to the human aspect of the problem. People who came to Assam 30 or 40 years ago and settled here and accepted the local culture should not be treated as aliens. It appealed to AASU and AAGSP to reconsider their adamant attitude on the cut off year in the greater interest of the nation. On the other hand, the Saptahik Nilachal was highlighting the cause of
the agitation in a forceful way. In its editorials it was inciting the people against the Centre's reluctance to solve the problem and appealed to the chief executives of the Govt. of Assam to lend full co-operation in the struggle for preserving the identity of the Assamese.

On April 5, Assam was declared a disturbed area under the provisions of the Assam Disturbed Areas Act, 1955, which Act was enacted to make better provisions for the suppression of disorder and for the restoration and maintenance of Public order in disturbed areas in Assam, whereby very wide powers were given to a magistrate and certain officers of police, Armed Branch of police and Assam Rifles to use force even to the extent of causing of death, against any person who was acting in contravention of any law or order in force, prohibiting the assembly of five or more persons or the carrying of weapons or things capable of being used as weapons or fire arms, ammunition and explosive substance.

The Armed Forces (Assam & Manipur) Special Powers Act, 1958 was also declared in Assam. This Act was promulgated to enable special powers to be conferred upon members of the Armed Forces in disturbed areas in Assam. The Act provides and empowers the members of the Armed Forces to use armed force for the
maintenance of public order even to the extent of causing death against any person who is acting in contravention of any law or order for the time being in force in the disturbed area. On April 6, an ordinance was promulgated by the President Sanjiva Reddy. This was the Essential Services Maintenance (Assam) ordinance empowering the state administration and the centre to declare any service as essential and prohibiting strikes in any "essential service". Government officials who participated in strikes were threatened with dismissal and others with punishment ranging from a six-month prison term to a time of Rs. 2,000. All these activities of the Government provoked the people. The immediate reaction was defiance. Declaration of Assam Disturbed Area Act and the Armed Forces Special powers Act was challenged before the Gauhati High Court and consequently the operation of both these acts was stayed.

On 12 April, Mrs. Gandhi arrived at Gauhati to persuade the movement leaders to accept 1971 as the starting point, not as the cut-off year. But the AASU-AAGSP insisted that 1951 must be the base year for detection, though deportation could take place at a later date. The Assam Tribune considered Mrs. Gandhi's visit as "a silver lining in the otherwise cloudy atmosphere", but lamented on the next day that the visit" turned out to be a disappointment because neither the Prime Minister nor the lea-
dership of the All Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad had shown any inclination to narrow down the differences. Even the C.P.I. Weekly Janamat emphatically pointed out in its editorials that the long drawn agitation created a crisis in economic, social and cultural life not only in Assam but in the whole of the Country. The paper regretted that Mrs. Gandhi failed to rise above the party consideration and look at the problem from the national point of view. It requested both the state and the central Govt. to abandon the policy of confrontation and revenge and take steps towards negotiated settlement of the problem.

On April 16, the Supreme Court refused to interfere with the orders passed by the Gauhati High Court staying the operation of the Disturbed Area Act and Armed Forces Act, on an appeal preferred by the Central Government and the State Government. The High Court was directed to hear the parties and dispose of the petition for vacating the stay order passed by the Court on April 18, Hon'ble Justice K.N. Saikia of the Gauhati High Court had to bear the burden of disposing of the application for stay of the operation of the impugned order and the petition from the Government side to vacate the same, under the directives of the Supreme Court. His judicious verdict was that the stay would continue, having however made
certain amends to the earlier stay order with directives to
the authorities that they should take "sufficient precaution"
while accomplishing with the provisions of such Act. The
Government did not waste time. Within hours of the judgment
Governor L.P. Singh promulgated the Assam Preventive Detection
ordinance. The long awaited much dreaded crack-down began.

The local press was reflecting the popular mood of re-
sentment against Government's recourse to draconian Acts and
Ordinance. They urged people to face any eventuality in their
fight for survival as a distinct socio-cultural identity. Tho-
usands of picketers turned up at oil installations to stop the
flow of crude and the Satyagraha programme was picking up. Un-
mindful of the Government warning the state Govt. and central
Goverment employees and workers were taking part in the peace-
ful Satyagraha programme. Thus it was seen that the more the
Government measures to crush the movement, the stronger was
the determination of the people to carry it on to a successful
end. The people did not seem to be the least perturbed by the
Governments measures. The Assam Tribune warned that strong arm
policy would push the situation to a point of no return. With
reference to the Prime Ministers reported statement that move-
ment must be kept under suspension for resumption of talks the
paper commented, "To create a congenial climate for negotiaions
it will be necessary for the Government to withdraw the impugned notifications on Disturbed Area and the Essential Service Maintenance (Assam) ordinance, 1980. If these two obnoxious measures are withdrawn we believe the organisations spearheading the movement will as a gesture of goodwill suspend the agitation so that proper climate can be generated to hold meaningful talks. The ball is therefore now in the Government's Court. The *Dainik Asom* also was confident that if the Government came forward to solve a National problem by constitutional means there would be no lack of corresponding gesture from the AASU and AAGSP. Confrontation would not lead to any solution; only sympathy and understanding and a spirit of accommodation would succeed, for the longer the movement continued the harder would be the chances of finding a solution.

The crackdown began from the early morning of the 19 April, 1980. At least 50 leaders were detained under the preventive Detention Act in those dramatic hours. Few inhabitants of Gauhati had heard the news when the city woke after dawn. But then they were galvanized into action by announcement broadcast through megaphones through Government jeeps that curfew had been declared. People left everything their clothes, their children their food, their work and went on to the streets. The violation of curfew was not merely a show of defiance. It was also
a demonstration of fearlessness of the people in the face of great odds.

Already there was picketing outside the campus of Narangri to stop flow of oil therefrom the Barauni. About four lakhs of the people gathered despite curfew being imposed within the vicinity of the oil refinery. None bothered about the curfew despite of the fact that the Army personnel moved swiftly to break up the picketers. The impact was so great that the Deputy Commissioner Sri Kamleswar Bora was left with no other alternative than to withdraw the curfew order. 36

On 20th April, a combined force of the CRP, Army and Assam police cleared the picket lines at Narangri in the early hours, aiming to clear the decks for pumping of crude to Barauni. But the executives, officials, engineers of the oil India Limited at Narangri refused to participate in the operation which would lead to pumping of crude oil beyond Guwahati.

The Assam Tribune remarked in anger, "The Government action has shown that its professed anxiety to find a peaceful solution was mere eyewash... it (the Government) was not really sincere and only wanted to prolong the negotiations in the hope that time will break the people's morale and the movement will peter out. How wrong as the Government's calculation is amply
proved by the massive March to Narangi which compelled the authority first to lift the curfew and subsequently withdraw the forces from Narangi and allow the picketing there to continue. It is indeed a great moral victory for the people of Assam". 37

The AASU and the AAGSP meanwhile announced a ban on export outside Assam of Jute, plywood, timber and bamboo. From 22nd April, a five day bandh was again started. On 29th April, martial sounds day was announced participated by lakhs of people, beating drums, clashed Cymbals, blowing conch-shells, sounded the horns of vehicles and what not. It was some thing unprecedented. In the meantime there were contain other developments. The Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam parmasivam was asked to go on leave and later posted off at Delhi; he was replaced by Ramesh Chandra and H.C.Sarin, an ICS officer was appointed as Chief Advisor to the Assam Governor'. 38

Bandhs were frequent, paralysing the administration completely, K.N.Sarma, Head of the Deptt. of Law, G.U. and AASU's advisor, observed', "The courage of conviction, honesty of purpose, marvellous sustaining power in the face of the realest odds, Davidlike leadership of the younger heads have simply stunned the corridors of power in New Delhi and their deputies
in Dispur. The only front in which the peaceful participants of the movement have been attempted to be overawed by the Government is the spate of draconian legislations formulated a quarter of a century ago for the sole purpose of containing the insurgent activities in a portion of a territory of the then mother state of Assam.

The columnist Inderjit wrote in the Assam Tribune, "People's power continues to assert itself boldly in Assam. Authoritarian forces howsoever ruthless, cannot ultimately stand up against the united will of the masses. Threats and show of arm might have not deterred the men, women and youth of the state from pushing ahead with their unprecedented Gandhian Satyagraha on the foreigners issue. Regrettably, the agitation has led to scores of unfortunate incidents in various parts of the state. These killed or injured during the period undoubtedly have a case too. However, no less painful is the centre's refusal to find an honourable principled solution to the problem on the basis of the constitution and the long term interest of the country."

The firing by the Central Reserve Police Force personnel at Kamrup on 5th May, 1980 aggrevated the already tense situation in the state over the foreigners issue. The CRPF unit fined upon the picketers from the compartment of an up passenger
train. At least eight to ten personnel including a police man were injured, five of them seriously. The Kampur firing was a direct provocation and as such it deserved to be roundly condemned. As a protest against it a 12 hour Nowgong Bandh was observed. The Assam Tribune commented in the editorial 'Kampur Firing', "The people of Assam have so far displayed exemplary restraint in carrying on their movement in the face of provocations. We are confident they will never deviate from the Gandhian ideal of peace and non-violence which has already earned plaudits from all over India and outside. We appeal to all participants and well-wishers of the movement not to be worked up over the Kampur happening but to take it in their stride. On no account the peaceful, democratic movement must be allowed to go off the rails".41

The local press took serious exception to the Prime Minister's remark at a press conference in Bhubaneswar on May 3, 1980. She said that she did not know what the AASU leaders would talk about if the dialogue was to start. Moreover she categorically pointed out that the movement on the alien's issue is "not peaceful".42 The Assam Tribune in an editorial "Realism Needed" remarked, "It is not the time for sabre rattling from either side; the need is to hammer out a solution".43 The Dainik Assom considered the Prime Minister's observation as most unfortunate and
highly hurting to the people of Assam and having no relation to facts. It also focussed on the paramount importance of making arrangements of guarding the border completely fool proof. The Assam Tribune in its editorial 'Resume the Dialogue' expressed distress at the AASU decision to issue 'Quit India' notices to persons on mere suspicion for such a programme of action was of doubtful authenticity and dangerous implication. A proper climate for the negotiated settlement was the need of the hour. But the paper is firm on the detection of foreigners. As it observed, "After all foreigners are foreigners and even if there may be a case for meeting out humanitarian treatment to those among them who have lived in this Country for decades, in contravention of the provisions of the law, whether deliberately or through ignorance, they cannot claim voting right on humanitarian grounds".

Towards the end of May 1980, The All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU) launched a counter movement. The Muslims claimed that they were harrassed. Curfew was declared in nine major towns of the valley and hundreds were arrested. Many decomposed bodies were found floating down the Kolong river at Nowgong. There was week long violence and clashes between the people of two religions. Here came the religion in the picture, 100 people were killed as reports came in. The disturbances
in Assam and police action in the wake of the counter-movement on May 26 gave the anti-movement elements a handy weapon with which to beat the movement. Even persons in authority who should be fully aware of the facts were seen to blame the movement itself though it should be clear to all that the aggressive posture was not taken by those spearheading the movement. Some political leaders at national level had also been airing their views based on wrong information. The fact that some foreign elements with local supporters aggravated the situation at the instigation of some political forces was not yet properly appreciated. It was also not realized that the movement was not directed against any minority, religious or linguistic. The organizers of the movement clearly declared that those who have been living in Assam since 1951 will not be physically disturbed. The early settlers in the state though they had come from another country, must be accepted as Indians living in Assam. In fact a large segment of them have already identified themselves with local interests. Hence it was clear that a section of these people was deliberately misled by interested quarters to oppose the movement. It was also misleading to call the current spate of violence communal in that the Assamese Muslim and many of the early settlers opposed the counter-movement in unequivocal terms. That the counter-movement was politically engineered was clear.
The Assam Tribune declared in unequivocal terms in the editorial 'Misunderstood Movement', "The need of the hour now is to restore peace and harmony among all sections of the people and to clear the misunderstanding in Assam as well as outside". The earlier efforts to resolve the issue over the foreign nationals problem having bagged down in a dangerous stalemate following sudden unleashing of repressive measures, there were fresh demands from almost all sides including a number of political parties opposed to the movement for immediate resumption of talks with the leaders of the movement. The latter too voiced their willingness to join in fresh talks provided these was held in the right atmosphere. But the Assam Tribune asked "how can there be a propitious climate for fruitful talks while hundreds of the Government's own employees were placed under suspension arrested or otherwise victimised for their support to an entire people's demand for upholding the sanctity of the constitution and safeguarding national security? Above all how could there be parleys when important leaders of the movement continue to be behind bars?"

The Prime Minister called a meeting of the leaders of opposition in parliament on 3.5.80. The meeting could not function as expected as only 7 out of 27 invited leaders attended the meeting and joined in the deliberation and the said deli-
Nation could not bring in any solution to the burning problem of the Country. It was an exercise of futility and only an appeal was made by the participants on their coming to the following conclusions, (1) The integrity of the Country should be safeguarded, (2) safety and security of minorities should be special responsibility of the Centre, (3) The problem of foreigners could be solved only through negotiated settlement and (4) In order to create an atmosphere conducive to holding negotiation, the agitation should be called off.

A day earlier the Assam Tribune expressed the fear that the meeting on 31st May was not well-timed, "moreover the latest turn in the situation in Assam caused by demonstration of the Minority students' union to counter the eight month-long peaceful and non-violent movement will give a handle to the Prime Minister for twisting the real objectives of the movement, thereby making it hard for the May 31 conference to search for a valid solution of the issue. In the prevailing circumstances therefore tomorrow's meet is unlikely to yield any positive contribution towards ending the Assam tangle unless the Prime Minister herself suggests a break through in a pragmatic way." The All Assam Students Union and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad clearly spelled out their stand on the issue that identifications of foreigners illegally staying in Assam must be on the basis of the constitutional provisions and relevant laws.
far as deportation was concerned there was no controversy as
the Government itself declared 1971 as the cut-off year. The
difference of opinion arise in respect of the persons coming
before that date which could be sorted out given the earnest-
ness on both sides. The organisation sphereheading the movement
already said that those coming before 1961 would not be physica-
ally disturbed obviously meaning thereby that they need not be
asked to quit though there was need to regularise their stay.
So the crux of the matter seemed to be in respect of the fore-
egners who had crossed over during the decade 1961 to 1971. It
was the considered opinion of the local press that given good
will and a spirit of give and take, some accord could be reach-
ed which would lead to defusing of the situation. The Assam
Tribune in an editorial commented, "The AASU and AAGSP are there-
fore right in asking for a clarification as to why the Govern-
ment seem to be insisting on 1971 as the cut-off year although
Srimati Gandhi says she is prepared to sit for a dialogue with-
out mentioning any cut-off date. In pleading for 1951 NRC and
52 voters' list the organisation sphereheading the movement did
not mean that all those identified will be deported. Admittedly
deporation of old settlers will pose some problems, but this
should not be a stumbling block in starting the work of Identifi-
cation Altogether the problem does not look insoluble which
the Prime Minister herself had averred several times; but there must be a will to tackle it in right earnest. 54

The leaders of the movement started the campaign for promotion and safeguard of communal peace and harmony in the state which came under heavy threat following the reign of terror unleashed by anti-movement elements in the wave of the counter agitation on the foreign national issue. The pledge-taking by thousands of young men and women on May 30 to maintain peace and amity was heart-warming. The Dainik Asom pointed out that in course of the ceremony the alert was rightly sounded against the deep-seated conspiracy hatched at high quarters to misrepresent and malign the current non-violent and democratic movement. The paper appealed to the people not to yield to provocation of any kind even while not neglecting their duty to protect themselves. 55

The east week of June saw clashes between the CPI(M) followers and supporter of the agitation. Initially the clashes occurred at Sarbhog in Kamrup and Kumara Satra in Dibrugarh, shortly after there was another clash at Billa in Barpeta, leading to police firing. There were report at this stage that the AASFP might be holding self protection rallies on 21-22nd June. The Adviser said that such rallies could not be allowed.
The days were actually observed as volunteer force days. Next the two organisations announced a twenty-four hours Assam bandh starting from 4th July, a picketing outside all state and central offices from 7th to 20th July and a national convention of freedom fighters in New Delhi on 27th July.

There was picketing of all the Government offices, Banks etc. till July 20th, to which even the Government employees joined despite threat of suspension and dismissal. All the Government employees stayed away from work. Everything was paralysed. In the meantime, however, dissensions were already created, seeds of suspicion already planted with deep roots to enable it to grow up strong. Muslims and Bengalees joined together irrespective of immigrants and the foreigners. It was not their fault. There was a conspiracy and the innocent were trapped into the network of evil designs. Even the Prime Minister said, "I am willing to agree to anything provided other Indians are safe in Assam and not to anything which puts life of minorities in danger."

The Assam Tribune editorially expressed resentment against the Prime Minister's remark, since such a statement, the paper thought, "adversely affected the needed congenial atmosphere for talks that was being built bit by bit during the last few days."

The Assamese weekly Janambhumi warned the Govt. against
repressive measures, indifferent attitudes and deliberate distortions of facts and pointed out that these acts would not help one little, but in creating a congenial atmosphere for negotiations. A report emanated from New Delhi that the Congress (I) plannned to start a countes movement on the foreign nationals issue. The report was indeed disquieting. There was no doubt that this move was an open challenge to the ten-month-long agitation which the people of Assam carried on to solve a national cause. The Assam Tribune felt that such a move would dissipate the slender hope that a satisfactory solution of the complicated issue would be found. In an editorial 'Avoid Confrontation' it commented, "As we have repeatedly pleaded in this column, the issue of foreign nationals should be solved through negotiations in the large interests of the Country, Assam's loss in various ways, specially in the academic field, has become staggering and the people are certainly anxious for a satisfactory solution of the issue. The AASU too has expressed its desire to negotiate with the Prime Minister but both sides have not in practice budged from their rigid stances, their anxiety to come to a negotiated settlement not withstanding". The paper warned that a hawkish posture whether it came from the Government as the ruling party or the agitation leadership could well be counter-productive. By all means, the
path of confrontation should be avoided and the search for a solution, though it proved elusive so far, must be contained with vigour.61

The movement on the foreign National Issue was on the cross roads. The agitation was suspended with effect from 21st July. The 14 day respite announced by the AASU and AAGSP allowing the Government time to respond to the repeated plea for resumption of meaningful discussions created a favourable opportunity for a resolution of the long continuing tangle. It had been the official stand so far that discussion could not be started so long as the agitation continued. Now the ball was indisputably put in the court of the central Government. The Assamese weekly 'The Janambhumi' commented that it was for the Govt. to prove its bonafides by coming forward for meaningful discussions. The immediate need, as emphasized by the leaders of the movements, was withdrawal of the repressive measures particularly the penal actions taken against Government employees, and release of the arrested leaders. So far as the Government employees were concerned no body desire to see indiscipline among them.62 But as the Dainik Asom felt, the present case of participation of the Government employees in the movement could not be construed as a plain act of indiscipline. It is the fundamental duty of the Government servants as citizens of the country to effectively express their resentment against the largescale
presence and continuing inflow of aliens endangering national security and integrity. This is an extraordinary situation and must be recognized as such.

Meanwhile R.K. Dorendra Singh, Chief Minister of Manipur began to bridge the communication gap between the central Govt. and the leaders of the movement. On 23rd July he came to Assam and started discussions with AASU and AAGSP. On 25th July, Mr. Dorendra Singh held a press conference in Gauhati attended by the AASU and the AAGSP representatives. He said that an agreement had been reached with the agitation leaders. The Movement would be withdrawn as a prelude to resumption of talks, within a week. The agitation leaders had agreed to withdraw their blockade on forest products of timber, bamboo and plywood. The oil blockade would continue. The Government had agreed to the reciprocal concession of release of all persons arrested under the PDO as well as withdrawal of the notifications issued under the Armed forces special powers Act and the Assam Disturbed Areas Act.

Mr. Nibaran Bora of the AAGSP proposed that all action by the Government should be initiated, not later than 27th July and talks started, not later than 31st July. Mr. P.K. Mahanta and Mr. B.K. Phukan clarified that lifting of the oil blockade could be done only after the Government withdrew all repressive
measures and fulfilled all the conditions set out. The initial reaction of the Assam Tribune was very enthusiastic. It regarded the agreement between the Chief Minister of Manipur and leaders of the movement as a significant step, a break-through, a golden opportunity to defuse the situation. A few days later the paper said, "The Dorendra formula, if one may say so, is not a formula to settle the main issue, but is one to remove the communications gap between the Prime Minister and the movement leaders which has remained unbridged since the abortive talks between them on April 12 last".

While the Dorendra formula was for a limited but important purpose, the search for a solution or a formula on the foreign national issue would have to be made in a dispassionate and unprejudiced manner. This was the considered opinion of the Dainik Asom.

Outside the state was in many quarters wrong impressions about the movement, condemnation of this movement as antinational foreign inspired etc. was a mischievous canard spread by incorrigible detractors of the agitation. In an illuminating article 'Facts and Fictions on Assam movement'. Veteran journalist Sri Satis Ch. Kakoti wrote about his experiences in Bangalore, Madras and Mysore. He said, "our religion, our culture and our part in the freedom struggle for which Mahatma Gandhi had paid hand-
some tribute are so deeprooted in Indian nationalism that no foreign or indigenous can alibrate us from India. It is a genuine fear of the people of Assam that, should the alien stay and participate in elections; not only the identity of the Assamese as part of the Indian republic will be lost, but the very security of India in this sensitive area will be risked beyond remedy. I can assure you that the movement is of the people financed by the people and for the people and moveover it is peaceful and non-violent”.

The movement leaders resumed talks on 19th August with Sri Yogendra Marewana the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, in Shillong but the talk could not prolong as the agitators insisted on withdrawal of the repressive and permissive measures imposed by the centre on Assam.

The Assam Tribune lamented, "Whether the stalemate in the Shillong talks is due to any intransigence on the part of the movement leaders or the Government's clumsy handling of the situation preceding the conference the fact of the matter now is that the chances of a satisfactory solution of the issue are bleak". There appeared sign of division amongst the movement leaders and politicians. The politicians were isolated. Momentum of uncertainty made people anxious. AASU had to show
fresh challenge to New Delhi and announced three-days programme of action which closed air services as well as passenger trains from and to the State. The Government came out with more stringent measure. C.R.P.F. was given free hand. Agitational programme however continued unabated. The language daily 'Dainik Assam' was severaly critical of the Govt's handling of the explosive situation. It asked, "Is our goal protection of the foreign nationals, instead of expelling them?"

Meanwhile Makwana said that "some elements" in the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad were responsible for the continuing dead lock over the foreign national issue. The All Assam Students Union was keen to settle the issue, but "some elements and some political parties" in the AAGSP were preventing it from coming to the negotiating with Delhi. He also said some foreign forces were behind the agitation.

Amidst the encircling uncertainty the most heartening of the developments was the decision of the Government of India to arrange talks between the union Home Minister, Giani Zil Singh, and the leadership of the Assam movement at New Delhi on September 17. Meanwhile the AASU in its executive committee meeting decided to hold rallies in support of the movement till September 12 when it would meet again to decide on the next phase of
the programme. It was sincerely to be hoped that the Government would issue invitation to the proposed meeting before September 12 so that there might not be any call for launching a fresh programme immediately. The AASU's allegation that the Government was only exploiting the present situation since the agitation was suspended by trying to divide the people could not be thrown out of hand. Since the failure of the Shillong talks the Government did not take any positive steps to defuse the situation which made the agitation leaders sceptical of the Government's sincerity to come to grip with the problem.

Few people expected that a session or two of discussions between the union Home Minister and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad at New Delhi on foreign nationals issue would result in its solution and thereby bring an end to the now nearly a year-long impasses, but as the talks continued for more than a week in a cordial atmosphere, the Press naturally thought that both sides were determined to strike a deal for settlement of the intricate problem.71 Contrary to this hope the talks were adjourned till October 6 next to be held in the union capital. This is obviously disappointing but the outlook for the next round of talks is by no means one of pessimism as neither the AASU and the AAGSP nor the Government took a negative posture this time. But divergent views existed between the Government
and the two delegations of the AASU and the AAGSP on the NRC as basis for identifying the aliens, the base year from which the identification should commence, international commitments and venguerness about humanitarian factors to govern identification and deportation of the foreigners. The silver lining in the situation was the Government's acceptance of the fact that the problem of foreign nationals in Assam was real and needed to be solved lawfully; from the side of the AASU and the AAGSP the emphasis was laid on the substantive issue unlike at the previous talks at Imphal and Shillong where comparatively minor issues were raised and this aborted the discussions.

The Assam Tribune editorially expressed satisfaction at the 'hopeful trends' and said, "A great responsibility therefore rests on the leadership of the AASU and AAGSP and we are sure it will rise to the occasion by taking a pragmatic approach keeping in view the mood of the people and the sentiments of the entire population."72

The next round of talks started from October 11, 1980. It would perhaps be correct to say that in both side there were doves and hawks whose conflicting views on some aspects of the issue stood in the way of evolving a settlement of the foreigners question. That Assam suffered in many ways due to the year
long movement could hardly be denied. The closure of the educational institutions in the state caused tremendous loss to the academic life; about the setback to developmental works the less said the better. For some months now the Government had been harping on the centres benevolence in granting financial assistance to the agitation-hit state while the finalisation of the sixth plan was round the corner. But, it was observed by Dainik Asom that the centres bounties would be of no avail unless normalcy returned to the state and popular participation mobilised for implementation of various schemes which was inconceivable without settlement of the issue of aliens. 73

On October 12 AASU warned the leaders of the different political groups and individuals in the State Assembly, who were on way to New Delhi not to go against the opinion of the people of Assam. The statement said that the role played by some all India political parties in the Assamese people's struggle for defending their existence was disgraceful. At a time when the people, irrespective of caste, creed and community, participated in the movement, the political leaders were busy otherwise. Those leaders did not hesitate to create tension and division among the people of Assam in the name of language and religion.
Continuing, the statement said that the people of Assam in general and the students in particular had to undergo immense hardship and make sacrifices. Many people became martyrs and many were wounded for life the students lost one valuable academic year. The role played by the political parties in this was extremely deplorable and, as a result of this the people lost faith in the political parties. The political parties however got an opportunity now to atone for their past mistakes. The statement further warned that if the political parties went against the aspirations of the people of Assam, those parties would not be tolerated.

While the agitation leaders were keen to arrive at an amicable settlement of the problem within the framework of the constitution and relevant laws, the Government side adhered to a posture of indifference leading to a virtual break down of the talks. The Government now appeared to be wholly opposed to deport even those who crossed over to Assam in the post 1971 period though the AASU-AAGSP representative was for accepting the immigrants of the 1951-1961 period and for an equitable distribution of the entrants who came to Assam during the 1961-1971 period, among all the states. Considering this game of attrition The Assam Tribune editorially remarked, "All in all the situation is really gloomy and all men of good will and peace should give in their serious thoughts to solve the
issue without delay". 75

On October 12, 1980 the Prime Minister devoted a fairly good deal of time to the Assam Issue. According to her the decision to identify those who illegally entered Assam since 1971 and stayed in the state was only a starting point to be followed by similar identification of pre-1971 foreigners if necessary. ‘And about deportation of Bangladeshi of the post-1971 period so identified she also said that the Bangladesh president Gen. Zia-Ur Rahman was aware of the matter meaning that such aliens would be sent back to their own Country. 76 But the crux of the problem was that the Government was not prepared to accept all the foreigners as foreigners but wanted to identify only those who entered Assam after 1971 and that too only one section of them. The Government was not prepared to identify the entrants between 1951 and 1961 and also wanted to put the entire burden of the entrants between 1961 and 1971 on Assam. The Assam Tribune observed, “It appears the Government would like to bypass the constitution and the laws of the land in regard to citizenship and thrust a political solution on a state which is currently facing a grave danger of losing its socio-cultural and political identity. Merely repeating that the doors for negotiations are still open will not help unless a positive approach is made. The uncertainty has continued too
long and everybody wants an early return to normalcy.\footnote{77}

On November 4th the Govt. gave full fledged orders to the Army to take all the measures to flush out oil from oil India pipelines frozen for months.\footnote{78} Dewan observed, "As a matter of fact here the movement leaders were caught napping since the Government on the one hand was wasting time in negotiations and unfruitful talks and on the other hand giving full fledged training to the Army personnels to undertake the operational works of flushing out oil from the refinery as they knew well of nonco-operation from the local workers, officers and engineers working in the Refinery. The Army did their job successfully being adequately trained in the meantime for the purpose".\footnote{79} The Assam Tribune commented, "The developments in this State in the last few days following adoption of strong arm tactics by the Government to deal with the resumed agitation on the foreign nationals issue are disconcerting and will deeply exercise everybody genuinely concerned with its future. The Dispur firing resulting in the tragic death of an employee while engaged in his office duties and the present attempt to break the oil blockade by force with the help of the military are not calculated to promote the atmosphere for a fresh dialogue towards resolution of the residual issues".\footnote{80}

The AASU condemned the Government, on 21st November,
for giving up implementation of the 1965 plan for border security and said that such lack of implementation had resulted in large-scale illegal immigration. On 24th November, the Union Home Minister had a meeting with Mr. Y.B. Chavan and Mr. A.B. Vajpayee. The two opposition leaders proposed that there should be a tripartite meeting, the Government, opposition and the agitation leaders. The Home Minister agreed. An invitation to the agitation leaders, from the Home Minister for joining the tripartite talks was received in Gauhati on 26th November.

On 2nd December, a team of the AASU-AAGSP leaders arrived in Delhi to meet opposition leaders and explain their position. After their arrival, the team announced that the two organisation were now agreeable to tripartite talks. The only condition they would make for participation in the tripartite talks would be that detection of aliens should be on the basis of the constitution and present law.

The Assam Tribune expressed reservation about involvement of more parties in the talks. It editionally remarked, "Direct negotiations between the Government and the movement leadership is the best way to find a solution. Involvement of all-India political parties which have shown scan regard for the movement all these months may, instead of advancing
the progress of the negotiations, put roadblocks only. The only good thing the opposition has said is that the problem could not be solved through use of force.22

The provision of Article 356(5), restricting the total duration of President's rule to a maximum of twelve months, meant that a popular Government had to be re-established during December so. The dismal showing of the Janata and the massive mandate that the Congress(I) received in the 1980 parliamentary elections had already meant a very considerable addition to the Congress(I) legislature party's numbers in Assam. President rule was revoked on 6th December evening and a new Congress-I Government headed by Mrs. Anwara Taimur took over on 6th December '80. How the people reacted to the emergence of this new Government was manifested in the call of a 24 hour total non-co-operation protesting against what the leadership of the present movement described as a Government of defectors elected on votes of foreign nationals. The Janambhumi commented, "If the present ministry do not ignore the realities and a constructive positive attitude, people's anxieties and suspicious will disappear. But a metamorphosis of such a kind is not yet indicated".23

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