CHAPTER-VII

THE PRESS AND THE 1983 ELECTION IN ASSAM.

The fall of the Gogoi Ministry and the dissolution of the Assembly added a constitutional requirement as one more factor compelling an early solution of the foreigners issue. Since the President's rule could be imposed only for a minimum of one year, an imperative need arose for the Central Government and the Assam leaders to find a solution within the next twelve months. Curiously there was a slowing down of the efforts to reach agreement. There were tripartite talks in April'82, but the AASU-AAGSP delegation made the observation that the Government of India had no genuine interest in finding out a satisfactory solution of the problem. In an editorial "An Extraordinary situation", The Assam Tribune considered it "unfortunate" that the tripartite talks which started with a bang virtually ended in a whimper. It also considered the Prime Minister's non-participation in the talks as "unfortunate". It expressed its apprehension in the following words, "what is in the Government's mind as to the future in view of holding of the election is unclear but it is just probable that in order to avoid a constitutional crisis an election would be imposed without solving the foreigners' issue though the consequences to such an eventuality can will be anticipated". The Dainik Asam also wanted the movement leaders and the Government to rethink the whole matter in a dispassionate manner to save Assam from night-
Even after an agonising series of discussion in the last two years there existed still wide difference in the perspectives of the Government and the AASU-AAGSP leadership. The Government did not favour Assam leader's insistence on detection and disposal of all entrants between 1961 and 1971, as it would be overlooking the historical facts of the partition and the commitment made to refugees who were forced to leave their homes in the erstwhile East Pakistan. Parliament had already expressed its will by passing the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, which excluded from its operation any person who came to India on account of disturbances or fear of disturbances in Pakistan. The agitation leaders wanted the 1965 policy Instructions scrapped. Under these Policy Instructions Bengali Hindu refugees who had crossed ever to India after the Indo-Pak war were to be given citizenship. The Agradoot editorially criticised the central Government and supported the movement leaders and called upon the people to be prepared for the continuation of the movement till the genuine interests of the Assamese people were fully secured. The newspaper held the Government as well the national opposition parties responsible for compelling the agitation leaders to intensify the stir with a 24-hours Assam bandh on May 6. The Assam Tribune expressed concern at the Government's show of force and remarked, "But it would be nothing short of foolhardiness on the part of
both sides if they think in terms of a confrontation rather than a reasonable solution without delay."  

According to the Dainik Assam, the bomb explosion at Maligaon, the head quarter of N.F. Railway and a Bengali-dominated area just on the eve of the Bandh and attempts to damage railway tracks in some places were the work of anti-social element who wanted the Government to take sterner steps. These elements were, according to the newspaper, always ready to fish in troubled waters and tried to bring about a State of direct confrontation between the Government and the movement leaders. The Union Law Minister informed the Rajya Sabha on 3rd May, 1982 that the Assamese fears of being reduced to a minority were exaggerated and not borne out by facts, for there was only a marginal increase in the percentage of the Bengali speaking people in the State in the period 1961-71. The Minister said that the process of detection and deportation of the post-1971 immigrants had been initiated in Assam already. The Assam Tribune expressed happiness at the Government's intention to strengthen the anti-influx measures along the Assam-Bangladesh border and to activate the machinery for detection of the post-1971 infiltrators. But the paper was bitterly critical of the left political parties who, it was alleged, tried to obstruct the process of detection in the name of harassment to the genuine
citizens of India. It observed, "The attitudes of these parties need no surprise anybody as they have persistently opposed the question of deporting the aliens who are known to be mostly encroachers on railway and forest reserve lands forming a sort of vote bank for the CPM and left parties". The Agradoot vehemently criticised those who found agitation dying out and warned the groups with vested interest that the agitation was fully alive and would overcome all obstacles through by of religion, linguistic and racial considerations.

On 29th May, the Chief Election Commissioner, Mr. S.L. Shakti dhar said that the election process in Assam would be initiated only after normalcy returned and a decision taken to lift President's rule from the State. He said that under the constitution, the Government could not hold elections in the State unless the atmosphere was congenial and electoral rolls were thoroughly revised. Considering the escalation of violence and the compulsion of time the Governor of Assam Prakash Mehrotra took the initiative to resume talks. The Dainik Asam though the Government of India seemed to be seized of the idea of holding elections without settling the aliens problem and thus trampling the wishes of the Assamese people. It eulogized the movement leaders for their disinterested service and self-sacrifice and warned all political parties again of reaping political advantage by joining
hands with divisive anti-agitation forces. It praised the role of the Governor and called on the movement leaders to take a constructive rather than agitational approach. The same view is expressed editorially by the *Assam Tribune*. In an open letter to the Governor of Assam, the editor of *Agradoot* reiterated the stand of the agitation leaders and criticised his administration for letting loose a reign of terror on the Assamese people. He asked the Governor, "Is there any example in history where a group of people was ruled by para military forces for all times to come? When will good sense prevail on the administration not to treat some people of the country as second class citizens but to place them by the side of other Indians".

The whole of August and September 1982 was spent either in negotiations or negotiating about negotiationcy. The *Dainik Assam* thought that withdrawal of all repressive measures was an absolutely essential condition for the success of all talks. The tripartite talks were resumed on 25th August, but were adjourned after three days of deliberation to enable the participants to study draft formula prepared by Ravindra Varma representing the Janata party at the talks. The formula delinked the process of detection of aliens from Government agencies and left the work to quasi-judicial tribunals functioning at the Assembly constituency level. The verdict of the tribunals would be guided by law. The overall progress at the talks was encouraging. This
mood was reflected in the editorial 'Delhi Talks' of the Assam Tribune, "In any case, the key to a solution of the complicated issue lies in understanding each other's points of view at the conference table in a constructive manner which happily is evident in the current talks."

The triparte conference resumed discussions from 1st September 1982. The obstinate resistance of the movement leaders to the Government's insistence on applying the 1965 policy Instructions created difficulties in the talks. Mr. Verma suggested in a now working paper that all those persons who entered Assam illegally between 1961-71 could be detected and their names could be deleted from the electoral rolls and might be dispersed according to administrative convenience, barring those who had been granted citizenship under the 1965 Policy Instructions and other laws. The Government showed reservations about the Verma formula but agreed to consider favourably the demand for suitable constitutional safeguards to ensure preservation of the Social, Cultural and political identity of the Assamese people. It however rejected the demand of the movement leaders to make the findings of the tribunals final, because it pointed out legal and constitutional difficulties in conceding wholesale detection of names of persons suspected to be foreign nationals. Under the circumstances the times of India editorially said that it would be a good idea for the participants to take a breather, consider in
depth the terms of settlement as close to fruition, and return for a final decisive engagement. At the end of the 8th September formal meeting, it was announced that the next round of talks would be resumed at New Delhi on 28th September. The Dainik Assam struck a note of caution. It thought that even if an agreement was reached by the beginning of October '82, it would not be possible to hold the elections to the State Assembly by March '83, because the process of election of foreigners and their disenfranchisement would take a long time. The Assam leaders found no encouraging change in the next round of talks at the end of September. The core of the problem related to the migrants who had come to Assam in the 1961-71 period. The agitation leaders were opposed to arming the proposed tribunals with power to determine the eligibility of foreigners to Indian citizenship. The work of the tribunals, according to them, should be confined to determining whether or not an individual was an Indian citizen and his date of entry into the state. But the Government representatives showed concern for the rights of these foreigners who were eligible for citizenship but had not so far obtained it. They said that they could not deny the right to franchise to these who were eligible for citizenship. The Assam Tribune in an editorial 'Dead lock Again' remarked, "The movement leaders may appear to the Government as having a rigid stand in this matter but the latter should realize that
once these illegal migrants are allowed to participate in the elector, their rights as citizens of India would be difficult to be withdrawn in any future security and the whole objective of the movement be lost".\(^{16}\)

The local press was unanimous in suggesting that the movement leaders did not adopt a rigid stand in the talks. According to them, the AASU-AAGSP conceded a great deal by agreeing to the acceptance of the entrants upto 1961. They agreed not to insists on immediate deportation or disposal of the decade between 1961 and 1981. What they were insisting on was not those entrants would be disenfranchised. The Assam Tribune found it to be a very reasonable demand in view of the fact that million of people of foreign origin can upset the socio-economic as well as the political balance in the State".\(^{17}\) The fact of the matter was that the Government was determined to hold the polls, irrespective of whether the problem of aliens was solved or not, while the movement leadership naturally wanted to find a solution first and was opposed to an imposition of elections. The Agradoot lamented that the Assamese people felt isolated in their struggle for survival and urged the leaders of the movement to intensity the agitation; "Withdrawal means death, fight we must".\(^ {18}\) The Dainik Asam applauded the Government for the proposal to provide constitutional
safeguards for political, educational and employment rights in order to preserve the identity of the Assamese people, but the newspaper clearly pointed out that the proposal could not be an alternative to the demand from Assam to identity, deport and disenfranchise the aliens. The primacy of this issue must be accepted and a solution found out without further delay. The newspaper further said that the safeguards as contemplated by the Government would not be enough to protect the Assamese from the impact of large scale influx of persons from outside including Indian citizens. This was borne out by the experiences in the Hills districts of composite Assam because the safeguards given to the tribal areas under the Sixth Schedule to the constitution, notwithstanding, the indigeneol people in those districts felt that there was heavy influx of people to exploit the tribals whose identify, they felt, was in jeopardy. In the circumstances, the paper remarked, the question of constitutional amendments for ensuring the Assamese interests should be considered in depth and in a calm atmosphere. While welcoming the belated realization by New Delhi that the Assamese identity was threatened by the influx, the Assam Tribune demanded of the Centre a strong determined political will to solve the primary problem of the State. In the editorial 'The Centre's after, the leading daily said. "The Assamese people do not want more than what is morally right, politically sound, economically feasible
The mood after the 1st October talks was one of cautious optimism. The atmosphere was one of tentative expectation that something might turn up, and of waiting on events. The tripartite meeting of 6th November, 1982 started off with the Home Minister reiterating the Government's earlier stand that March 1971 should be the cut-off date. The Assam leaders protested at the reference to 1971, when the current talks had been arranged to discuss the fate of 1961-71 entrants. Ravindra Varma presented his revised formula to reconcile the points of view of the Assam leaders and the Government. The salient points of the new formula were:

1. Those who entered Assam between 1961-71 would be put into categories:
   (a) Those who applied for and obtained certificates of citizenship from the competent authority.
   (b) Those who had been duly rehabilitated and resettled by the Assam Government but had not obtained citizenship certificates.
   (c) Those who had not applied for or obtained citizenship certificates or had not been settled by the Government of Assam, and yet had their names inscribed on the electoral rolls, and
   (d) Those who had neither obtained citizenship certificates nor got their names included on the rolls.
2. Names in category (a) would be retained in the rolls.

3. Complaints regarding indiscriminate issue or acquisition of citizenship certificates by fraudulent means or inadequate verification would be settled by an authority under section 10 of citizenship Act.

4. Names in category (b) would be retained in the electoral rolls.

5. Pending scrutiny and adjudication by tribunals, no new citizenship certificates would be issued.

6. In regard to names in category (c), complaints could be lodged for their deletion from the rolls or against the inclusion therein, on the basis of the constitution and the existing laws, stating grounds thereof. The onus for providing claims would be governed by the constitution and the existing laws, in particular where the person concerned can invoke the protection of provision to section 2 of the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950 which gives the right of residence and generals the right to apply for citizenship under the relevant sections of the citizenship Act.

7. Names of those found without valid claims would be removed from the rolls and placed in the category for dispersal. The question of dispersal of the foreigners of 1961-71 period, whether their names were retained in the electoral rolls or not, and modalities for such dispersal, would be discussed after the elections.
8. Those in category (d) would also be dispersal. 20

The movement leaders rejected the revised Verma formula and eventually the talks failed. There was a tentative agreement for resumption of discussion on 6th December. The Assam Tribune agreed with the AASU-AAGSP in repudiating the new Verma formula. In an editorial 'Talks Sans Accord' the newspaper remarked, "If the new proposal based on the Verma formula seeks to retain all the Hindu refugees without dispersing them to other states, the whole exercise for getting rid of the aliens from Assam for which the people have suffered for long three years would be fruitless". 22

The Only positive outcome of the last tripartite talks was the decision that two Union Ministers R. Venkataraman and P. C. Sethi would visit Gauhati and make joint inspection with AASU-AAGSP leaders of Indo-Bangla Border checkpoints to see for themselves how effectively the border was sealed. But both the Assam Tribune and the Dainik Asam editorially expressed suspicion that the real purpose of the visit was to assess whether under the present situation, irrespective of a solution or otherwise of the aliens problem, elections to the State Assembly would be possible early next year. 23 Meanwhile the movement leadership prepared a programme for the next phase of the agitation. All this indicated that although another round of talks was on the card next month,
neither the Government nor the ASSU-AAGSP leadership appeared to be quite optimistic about its outcome.

Despite discouraging response from the Assam movement leaders, the central Government hoped that at the next round of talks the AASU-AAGSP would at last show spirit of accommodation and give due consideration to the latest Ravindra Verma formula for detection, deportation, and dispersal of aliens. While the movement leaders virtually rejected the formula and insisted that all the foreigners of the 61-71 period must be dispersed from the State, the Government's options were limited in view of the constitutional requirement of holding elections before the expiry of the second term of the President's rule in March next. The movement leaders were determined to oppose elections before the solution of this problem was found. The press in Assam felt no hesitation to reiterate that an election with the voters' lists being half heartedly corrected would not be worthwhile. The Assam Tribune, however editorially remarked, "But the moot question is: What if the December talks fail? Will New Delhi go ahead with its plan to hold the poll in March next?"

In December 10, Arun Shourie who made an epoch in investigative journalism delivered the Second Annual Lecture of the Assam College Teachers' Association on what we can expect from a popular movement. He said that the Assam movement was now at a crucial stage and if it faltered at this stage, it would be the greatest
disservice not only to the cause of Assam but to the country as a whole the felt that a sense of frustrating was seeping into the minds of the people and the movement leadership as well. This could be fatal for it could either turn the leadership to a violent path or might allow the extremists to get the upperhand. Brushing aside the sense of frustration, Shourie observed that Assam movement achieved almost all the objectives of a popular movement. It cocussed on a national problem and exposed the vested interests.25

The elections to the Assam legislative assembly had to be completed before the first week of March 1983 to avoid constitutional crisis. A feeling was growing that a forced poll at this stage would result in extremism and even insenfency, lending a secessionist colour to the movement. The local newspaper, which all along supported the agitation, were making oblique references to the inevitability of elections within the next few months but at the same time asking Government and the agitators to find a solution to the foreigners' problem and meeting the aspirations of the people before the elections. The Dainik Assam felt that with the movement leaders relentless on their demands and the Government apathetic, the state was leading towards days of police high-handedness and violence.26 The Janambhumi opined that if election were held without settling the man issue of foreigners and without proper revision of electoral rolls, it
would depat and damage the cause for which people had been fighting so long. The News Star in an editorial 'Not By Imposition' observed, "In our considered view, an imposed election, or an election held partially under armed cover, can never be turned as election. Election is a process that presupposes conditions under which people can choose their representatives freely and without fear. Any exercise in putting up a show of election under paramilitary or military escort can be but a mockery of the democratic process. Besides, a Government formed through such mockery of the democratic process will only earn the people's total and spontaneous rejection." Nibaran Bora wrote in the Assam Tribune, "What does a democratic election mean? What are its parameters? Does it mean that adult franchise being granted me. I exercise it against the spirit of my nationhood, a nationhood which the constitution has interpreted in unalterable terms? The answer here, in Assam, in the context of the last three years' movement is a clear No." Tripartite talks among the agitation leaders, the Government of India and the leaders of the opposition in parliament resumed on 4th January'83. But the talks broke down on the question of the future of the post-1961 entrants. On 5th January after a brief meeting the talks were adjourned sine die. On 6th January, the Election commission of India announced that bye-elections to twelve parliamentary constituencies in Assam and general
elections to the Assembly would be held on February 14, 17 and 20 on the basis of 1979 electoral rolls. The movement leaders opposed the election.30

The Arrest of the AASU-AAGSP leaders just on their arrival back at the Guwahati Airport on their return from Delhi negotiations exposed the adament attitude of the Government and angered all people. The support-ers of the movement warned that they would exploit every method to settle the election process right from the beginning. There was not doubt that the Congress (I) and the liflig hts woule participate in the elections, but in the beginning the non-left opposition parties were not sure at all. The Bharatiya Janata Party announced a boycott of the elections without much hesitake. The Cachar distrinetwas prepared for elections. Meanwhile on 24th January the Supreme Court Stayed the operation of the Assam Government order banning Assam Tribune and Dainik Assam from printing publishing reports relating to current agitation. On 25th January the Janata Party and Lok Dal decided to take action plan against Assam poll.

The Government took extraordinary Steps for holding elections in Assam. For printing of the elector rolls and ball of papers help was sought from printers in Cachar & other States such an Meghalaya and West Bengal as there was risk of the printers of Assam boycotting work. The I AF was told to make preparations for a massive airlift of paramilitary forces to the vari-
ous airfields in Assam. Dainik Asam editorially expressed anger at the atrocities on the punocent people in the name of law and order. It criticised the Union Government for not enforcing the citizenship laws. It condemned the power hungry politicians for creating the atmosphere of panic and the feeling of insecurity. It declared in clear terms that was at stake was not only the future shape of things in Assam but also the future trend of political development in the whole of the North Eastern region. It wondered why this election was going to be held when it was officially announced that compensation for a gazetted officer getting killed during election would be Rs. 1 Lakh and that for a nongazetted employee would be Rs. 50,000.\textsuperscript{31}

An air uncertainly was hanging over Assam. The election process was on. Normally the State should be buzzing with poll excilement and campaigning. But there was little sign of it. Instead violence erupted in different placer. Top opposition leaders again urged the Prime Minister and the Election commisslon to postpone the election and not to play with five. Neve­rtheless the Commission and the State authorities led by the Governor were pushing ahead with the centre's wish to bring the new Assembly into being Before the President's rule ended. The Supreme Court dismissed the petition filed by Raj Narain seeking stay of Assam Elections. The Chief Justice remarked, "We are not saying that the sitrations is not serious, but we are
powerless to interfere". Since the announcement of elections Bonds, Janata Curfew, bomb explosions, wide-spread violence, riots and deaths continued and the State Government used all its powers to terrorise the people. The press in Assam voiced opposition to this kind of poll at the point of a gum. The Janambhumi pointed out that when candidates kept themselves in hiding and the police and other para-military forces unleashed a reign of terror on the people, killing and torturing them and the officers and employees were baited with life-insurance money to perform poll duty, these surely did not constitute a proper and congenial climate for a free and fair election. The Asam Tribune editorially observed, "That the election under the present circumstances will be a force is not the end of it. The decision of an imposed poll has already created a schism giving rise to social tensions. Besides, it has alienated a whole nationality pushing it further from the mainstream of national life. This colonial attitude of the centre must go and a way must be found to stall the election."

Dainik Asem shuddered at the widespread violence and death and visualised the distinct danger of unprecedented clashes over the elections and editorially remarked that if the Election commission ignored this grim reality and went ahead with the election process, it would do grave damage to the national unity and to popular faith in the democratic process. On February 9, Charan Singh, Ex-Prime
A wave of arson and violence gripped the trouble-torn Assam. Antipoll demonstrations continued. Assam's image as a multi-cultural and secular state was shattered. Everything seemed poised for a cathartic break-up along communal lines. Everyone was toeing a hard line in which reason and logic had no role to play. History's bloodiest confrontations were on the cards. People were separated by chasms of anger and virulent hatred.

The February 1983 elections in Assam were the bloodiest ever in the history of independent India. The first phase of election on February 14 continued on the corpses of the innocent people and was over with the darkness of the graveyard. With tele communications totally disrupted by the agitationists and government agencies lightlipped, reports came of slaughter at Gohpur as a prelude to a grisly theme. Hundreds were killed. Thoughout Assam innocent people were getting killed. Many Villages were burnt douri. A horrible violence occurred on 17th February, the second day of the poll. But the Government blithely ignored the rising tide of arson death and communal disharmony. After witnessing unprecedented violence and with more violence not ruled out, the Chief Election Commissioner R.R. Trivedi asked the State Government if it wanted to go ahead with the polling on the 20th February, the final day. The Go-
vernment declared that the situation was all right. The *Assam Tribune* in an angry editorial 'Gun-Point Poll' wrote on the first day of the election, "Beginning today will be enacted in the State a unique spectacle, unparalleled in the history even of the totalitarian States, let alone the democratic countries. A Government that prides itself as sitting on the destiny of the world's longest democracy has proposed what in effect is a gun-point poll". With the bulk of the people opposing it, the election was held with the arthed support of the largest concentration of military and para military forces ever associated with any election in this country, perhaps any where in the world. *Dainik Asam* and *Janambhumi* in their editorials highlighted the police firing and alleged police atrocities but never blamed the agitationists for their role in the whole drama. The *News Star* highlighted the insult, injury, indignity and provocation to which the Assamese people were subjected by imposing an election without a solution of the foreign nationals' problem and using the 1979 electoral rolls which allegedly contained the names of aliens. The paper held Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her party soley responsible for introducing the germs of insurgency and inter necine clashes culminating in the tragic and ghastly happenings in the different parts of Assam. The *Assam Tribune* expressed concern at the gloom cast over the whole State. It observed very aptly, ... it is the duty of the Government to see that such lawlessness does not recur. Adequate police force
should be posted in vulnerable areas. The public also have their duty. Amid the darkness the voice of sanity must prevail. But it was unfortunate that the Election Commission failed to realise the explosive nature of the Assam situation. In the violence a large number of persons lost their lives, extensive damages to property were caused and the traditional amity among the various communities were affected. In the morning of February 18, huge mob surrounded Nellie with guns, spears, swords, daos. The murderous frenzy of the mob engufed the entire area. There was blood bath, smoke and fire everywhere. None was spared. The slaughter continued for 4 hours. Victims were Muslims. The whole of Nellie became graveyard. Nellie toll rose to 600 but some reporters gave the figure to be at least 1000 people killed.

*Asian Recorder* reported, "About 1000 people were estimated to have been killed—about 600 in the Nellie area alone in the week long anti-election carrera, which engulfed a stretch of 100 kur in the Morigaon sub-division of Nowgong district. Newsman, who visited the affected areas in Nellie and Morigaon, as also the adjourning areas on February 20 found people dumb-strick-ed and panicky after the nightmare, the like of which few had ever gone through*.41

If the massacres of Gohpur Mangaldoi, Khoirabari, Goreswar are considered, the death toll will be Colossal Sekhar Gupta puts
7000 killed in one fortnight of violence and ethnic frenzy.  

The Assam Tribune wrote in the editorial 'Nightmare in Assam'. "The actual casualty figure in wanton police firing and clashes are not known, nor will it be known until an impartial inquiry is conducted but there is no doubt that the loss so far has been colossal in terms of human life and property." From the manner in which the Government tackled the situation, Dainik Assam inferred that the administration pressed all its energy and resources to complete the so-called election without earning to protect the life and property of the people, notwithstanding the deployment of 67 GRP attalions and police forces from other States. The paper blamed the Central Government for its total indifference to the feeling of the Assamese people and the consequent disither and called upon the people of India to realise the significance of the burning Assam. The Assam Tribune in the editorial 'This Sham Election' wrote, "If this is the sample of Indian decocracy in action, people's faith in the democratic process is up to receive a rudge jolf. The irregularities and illegalities committed in every phase of the poll process and the general situation are such that it is nothing but ramming an election down the people's throat at gunpoint". The election exercise was a farce, The electoral rolls contained names of foreigners. Thousands of young eligible voters were excluded from them. Polling took place
virtually under a state of siege with over a lakh of para-military forces and armed constabulary of some other States deployed. And poll personnel had been imported from Delhi and other States making a mockery of the whole exercise. All the local newspapers were unanimous in holding that the Election commission as well as the Administration might brag that the election had been completed in accordance with the laws but if objectively studied it would be found that it had neither been completed nor done legally and constitutionally. The newspapers expressed concern over the fact that this unwanted poll generated distrust and animosity all around cutting at the very roots of the country's integrity. It was really immotional who killed whom. What was material was that human beings were killed. The voting figures turned out to be such that the proverbial elephant came to give birth to a mouse. The voting statistics in terms of percentage of the total electorate are as follows.46

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>1978</th>
<th>1983</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>60.13%</td>
<td>62.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>76.47%</td>
<td>58.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbi Anglong</td>
<td>57.64%</td>
<td>38.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Cachar Hills</td>
<td>64.33%</td>
<td>55.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>66.08%</td>
<td>28.21%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
The above figures shown that barring the isolated Cachar and some parts of Goalpara and Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills Districts, all other districts responded to the call of non-Co-operation with election in varying but substantial degrees. The Congress (I) was the only party which set up nominees for all the seats both in the Assembly and the Lok Sabha. There were 126 Assembly Seats and 12 Lok Sabha seats. The Congress(S) entered 37 for the Assembly and 6 for the Lok Sabha, the CPI-28 and 2, CPM-28 and 2, the plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) 27 and three, and independents 281 and 14. The Congress(S), CPI and CPM were members of the six-party left and Democratic Alliance candidates in the Brahmaputra Valley were forced to remain indoors or resort to only individual canvassing because of the resistance of the movement leaders to the election. Most of those in the fray operated from circuit houses and inspection bungalows under heavy police protection. The Congress(I) captured all the five Lok Sabha seats for which country of votes was completed. The Congress (I) obtained two-thirds majority, having secured 90

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Congress (I)</th>
<th>Non-Co-operation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>68.11%</td>
<td>24.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrong</td>
<td>70.63%</td>
<td>40.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>62.73%</td>
<td>5.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>69.93%</td>
<td>16.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>66.52%</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62.93%</td>
<td>32.56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the 108 seats, polling for which had been completed. The following table shows the party position in the 126-Assembly:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats Won</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congress (I)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress (S)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPM</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTC A</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Over 18 seats were still to be contested. Mr. Hiteswar Saikia headed a new Congress(I) Ministry on February 27.

It is obvious that the situation in Assam was not congenial for holding a free and fair elections. The Government armed itself with special powers under the NSA, ESMA, the Assam Executive Magistrates (Temporary Powers) Act, 1983 and went to the extent of invoking the police Act of 1861 a relic of the bygone British days— which were all repugnant to any democracy. The results of any democracy. The results of the election were a challenge to the unsience of the nation, the final country could not be of the ballot papers alone but also must cover the bullets fired by the police hundreds of young boys and girls who fell victims...
to these bullets, several thousand dead bodies lying around in
Villages, thousands of houses burnt, the unaccountable proper­
ties looted and the laks of people who were turned homeless. All
the papers asked; Who's then guilty of enacting this bloodiest
drama in the history of a democratic Country? The apprehension
expressed by the leading newspapers that holding of election at
Gunpoint would have disastrous consequences proved true. In an
editorial 'End of the Drama' Dainik Asam pointed out that the
Government lacked the necessary political will to face the fore­
igners' issue and so adopted the easier of allowing the things
to drift and by means of divisive politics and misrepresentation
sought to deny the existence of the problem. The imposition of
election without setting the issue and without revision of the
electoral rolls was an open threat to the Assamese people that
unless they surrendered to the rulers they would be done away
with and must suffer mutual killing too. The paper emphatically
asserted that the farcied and murderous election has no legiti­
macy and that the Government born out of it was neither represen­
tative for democratic.47

The Janamdhumi bitterly remarked that the Government crea­
ted out of the illegitimate election had anti-people character
and was a symbol of the suppression of the people and their will
and therefore had no moral right to run the administration.48
The Agradoot emphatically observed that the unwanted election
and the communal polities of the Congress(I) were responsible for the tragic and ghastly happenings in the different parts of the State. The announcement of the election was move a declaration of war, than a step-in aid of furthering the democratic process, if one were to judge the Gory events by the Government's ridiculous postures. As soon as the elections were notified, the Government attempted to gag the media by imposing press censorship. The Supreme Court mercifully stayed the operation of there orders. Sensing that momentous events would soon overrun Assam the national and international media rushed their correspondents to the troubled State. At least three international agencies, the BBC, AFP and Reuters sent their reporters to Assam during the elections and despite attempts at suppression by the Government the news about the situation in the State was disseminated all over the world. The Agradoot said that the Government controlled media, the All India Radio and the national television net work appeared to be living in a world of their own and continuously suppressed and and misrepresented the news so much so that anyone wanting the correct news would now listen to the BBC, VOA or Radio Australia, The credibility of our national media was lost in Assam. The cover-up of the happenings and the strangulation of free dissemination of news boomeranged on the Government. Officially, Assam was calm and peaceful right up to the 20th February the day the ele-
On February 22, in a rare expression of concern, Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the Assam killings and asking the people in the State to restore normalcy, soon after the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and had appealed for peace and building an atmosphere in which a massive relief and rehabilitation programme could be undertaken. She said that all kinds of acrimony must be avoided, especially as many communal organizations had come up in Assam which could aggravate an already difficult situation. The Home Minister P.C. Sethie said that the Government did not stand on prestige and would resume negotiations with the movement leaders— but only when a conducive atmosphere had been created. The brutality and the horror perpetrated on the innocent people, including children and large-scale arson and destruction of properties caused deep anguish. The immediate provocation for this holocaust, he said, was the resentment of some sections of the people against those who wished to exercise their democratic right of franchise. He regretted that the AASU-AAGPS opposed holding of elections and resorted to all means to frustrate the process. In the period between the nominations and the poll. Large-scale arson was resor-
ted to by miscreants to disrupt communications by destroying bridges and sabotaging the railway tracks and telephone lines. Mobs attacked police parties outposts, polling books with lethal weapons including firearms. He said, I seek-co-operation of all members, what ever their views or policies, in promoting harmony and amity among different communities and groups living in Assam. What is needed now is not acrimony but a healing touch. The Home Minister made it amply clear that the Central Government no longer considered the AASU and the AAGSP as the sole representatives of Assam's interests and that, therefore, it would in future consult other parties, elected representatives and representatives of ethnic groups and minorities.

The newspapers in Assam associated themselves wholeheartedly with the resolution passed by parliament unanimously condemning the unprecedented killings and riots in Assam and appealing for peace and return of brotherhood among all sections of the people in the State. But no newspaper blamed the AASU-AAGSP for their obstinacy in negotiations and for the resulting frustration. No newspaper blamed the supporters of the agitation for creating chaos. The Assam Tribune editorially said, "There is no doubt that unless there is peace and harmony in Assam which has been subjected to 2 nightmarish situation by a reign of terror with the aid of unbelievably massive CRP and other paramilitary personnel, no meaningful dialogue on the foreign
nationals issue can be held." The editorial criticised the Union Home Minister's view that the AASU-AAGSP were not the sole representatives of Assam and said, "This is indeed adding insult to the injury for the Assamese people. The Centre in collusion with the Election Commission already committed a Himalayan blunder by imposing a bloody poll, non it seeks to associate in future talks those elements who pressurised the Government to hold the election to grab power by hook or crook". The Janamabhumi urged the Government to abandon its contemplated plan to restart negotiations involving the "so-called" elected representatives and their associates who masquerading as minority spokesmen lauded the Centre in an intractable situation leading to clashes and conflicts, arson and death. In a series of editorials, the Dainik Asam refused to recognise the new Congress(I) Ministry as the representative of the people and wanted the Election Commission to declare the poll null and void.

The Congress(I) Victory left the leftist Democratic Alliance high and dry though the letter contested all the seats. The Janata party, the Lokdal, the BIP and a few other parties boycotted the poll associating themselves with the Assamese people's anti-election stand. The reason of the disconfiture of the L.D.A was that the Marxist parties were alienated from the people. This situation led the Assam Tribune to comment, While the Congress(I)'s Victory in the poll is, by any deckoning, Pyrrhic, the LDA's fai-
lure in the hustings is admittedly disastrous. The newspaper was indifferent to the formation of the new ministry and said, "It appears that the people in Assam and outside will have to live with this 'representative Government' until circumstances compel the Centre to realize its folly in foisting a Government on the people through an election which was held at gunpoint and was irregular in all respects." The Agradoot highlighted the basic problem which resulted in social, political and economic tension in the State and created a sense of insecurity about linguistic and cultural identity in the Assamese mind. This basic problem was the large-scale influx of aliens over the years and unless this problem was salved, Assam's agony would not end. What was responsible for killing of more than 5000 people and rendering more than 5 lakhs of people homeless? The paper's clear answer was the government's dilatory tactics and its utter failure to understand the real agony of the people, why did the Government forget their own commitment of clearing the voters' list from 1971 onwards? How could they hold elections without fulfilling that commitment? This was the first time in human history that because of constitutional compulsion thousands of people were murdered and lakhs of people rendered homeless and suffered in various ways. The Agradoot expressed resentment against Mr. Gahdhi's castigation of the agitationists for this carnage.

The Congress (I) Ministry headed by Hiteswar Saikia assu-
med office in the midst of unprecedented violence, disturbance and disorder. Never before any ministry had taken the reins of administration in such an unenviable situation marked by near-total breakdown of the law and order machinery against the background of the bloodiest blood-bath that took a toll of innocent lives of men, women and children in thousands. The twenty-four hour total non-co-operation immediately after the swearing in of the Saikia ministry undoubtedly demonstrated the strength of the forces not reconciled to the installation of a responsible Government in the State. Despite talks in some circles about their non-recognition of the "illegal ministry", the tritter experience of the people with long spells of the President's Rule made them accept the installation of the ministry without much grumbling, because in their assessment any responsible Government was preferable to non-responsible bureaucratic raj. Despite occurrence of incidents of violence and arson even after the ministry coming to the saddle of administration, the number and magnitude of such violence were not high. The attitude of the general people towards the ministry was mixed, with a substantial section not certain about its tenure. But the press in Assam was clearly against what they called the "illegal Government".

On March 14, the Union Home Minister P.C. Sethi said in the Lok Sabha that it was the Voters who had conferred legitimacy on the elected representatives to the Assam Assembly and he clai-
The New Star deplored the Home Minister's remarks as "Sweeping and misleading" because the overall percentage of poll, according to the paper, did not reflect the correct position of popular participation in the poll, since the voters list contained names of dubious voters and high percentage of polling took place only in Bengali dominated Cachar district and some other pockets in the State. "Morally therefore, the present elected body cannot claim the sanction or mandate of the people of Assam". 60

Mr. Sethi denigrated the Assam movement as basically violent and directed, not against foreigners, but against non-Assamese Indians. The News Star expressed resentment against the Union Home Minister's attempt to malign the Assam movement. It said, "The thrust of Mr. Sethi's statement at this point was deliberately calculated to falsify the actual position so as to serve his narrow partisan interests. If Mr. Sethi was convinced that the movement was basically violent, why did his Government continue its prolonged negotiations with the movement leaders? ..., If Mr. Sethi thought that the movement was not against foreigners, but against non-Assamese Indians, how could then the Government recognise the validity and magnitude of the aliens issue as a 'national problem'? 61

The Assam Tribune also did not lag behind in criticising Mr. Sethi's statement in the Lok Sabha. The paper alleged
that a major share of the violence that occurred in Assam must be borne by the Government's own para-military forces. Further, as the paper said, the Congress (I) leaders viliated the communal relations in the State and the administration acted in an irresponsible manner in allowing mob violence to take place. According to the paper the Assam movement received wide support and earned praise for its sustained peaceful character not only in India but also outside. Thus the Home Minister's Statement was an attempt "to boost up the 'illegitimate' Government in Assam installed through an unwanted macabre election on the one hand and malign the peaceful movement in Assam over the issue of foreign nationals on the other". The criticism of the central Government was a regular feature of the editorials of all leading newspapers of Assam. The Dainik Asam editorially expressed indignation at the invocation of the Disturbed Areas Act and the Armed Forces Special Powers (Assam and Manipur) Act of 1953 in a major portion of the Brahmaputra Valley to bring the area virtually under army rule. According to the paper, the Government's repeated claim during the election period that the situation was under control was nothing but a pack of lies to give the public outside Assam the impression that the conditions in Assam were not that bad to postpone the so-called poll. The paper alleged that the wide and wanton use of the CRPF and other para-military forces ensured the unhindered Victory of the Congress(I) in the
elections and expressed the views that the lingering tension created by the unwanted poll would be difficult to be removed unless the Saikia Ministry voluntarily resigned. 63

The News Star appreciated the timely appeal of the Assam Sahitya Sabha to all sections of people for working towards restoring a sense of mutual trust and human values at this critical point but remarked, "...we are constrained to note that this national literary and cultural organisation was expected to play a more active and leading role in preserving and maintaining the traditional bond of unity and amity among all sections of the indigenous people". 64 The News Star was critical of the Government's declaration that the solution of the issue of the foreign nationals would be taken up only after normalcy returns to the State. According to the paper, "the taking of the deletion and deletion work is itself a precondition to the return to normalcy." If warned the minorities to "exercise utmost restraint and dis- sist from provocative statements and actions at the behest of political parties" and observed, "Then only can we save Assam from the growing threat of the rise of insurgency, the bastard child born out of bungling with the democratical process and the pursuit of divisive polities". 65

What happened in Assam should set the whole of the Country thinking. The local newspapers might ventilate their grievances
against the Government but they went beyond their jurisdiction when they supported every move good or to stop the election remmed down their unwilling themots. The election was definitely a defeat for the Government. Arithmatically, the movement won. But it was a victory sullied with violence. From the editorials it was obrious that the agitation war not born merely out of economic conditions. Even if the per capita income of the average Assamese people had been doubled instead of haing been halved, the agitation would have been allpervading. The agitation was a Socio-cultural upserge for the preservation of the identity of Assam within India. To ignore or twist or distort this effect was not in the interest of the Country. The problem, as viewed in Delhi, was a problem of foreign national, of immigrants, of minorities and of human rights. For Delhi, it was a question of accommodation, for Assam, it was the dilemina of existence.66

That the holding of elections was responsible for the Assam holocaust was the considered view of many national newspapers. The Times of India in its, editorial entitle 'After the carrage wrote, "The Nellie tragedy is an outcome of the Union Government's decision to impose elections on Assam ...It must have known that a majority of the Assamese speaking inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley would boycott it and do all in their power to frustrate it".67 The Statesman wrote in an
editorial entitled, 'An Appeal to Reasons'. "Some of the forces at work known from the beginning, new ones have been unleashed in the course of the turmoil. The Prime Minister could have avoided identifying so pointedly with the Bengali electorate... this did not excuse the cynical maliner in which Sri Atal Behari Vajpayee tried to exploit opposing sectarian prejudices, regardless of the BJP's basic ambivalence towards the main issue in the Assam controversy. The non-communist opposition parties seized an explosive situation to gain a dangerous local relevance." The Hindusthan Times in an editorial 'The Healing Touch' remarked. "It is a moot point whether any ministry now formed will be able to function effectively... It might well become necessary to impose President's rule once again and to use that interregnum to resume the dialogue with the agitationists and to apply the salve on the wounded Psyche of the State". The Indian Express writes in the editorial 'Next steps in Assam', "What happens next? Having held the poll even 'if it has only been 'completed' in 108 out of 126 constituencies it would be fatuous to dissolve the Assembly an initio. At the same time the Assembly cannot be regarded as reflecting the will of the people." It is obvious if the elections had not been held, the life and property of millions of people would not have been in danger. The nature and the incalculable consequences of the turmoil need to be pondered but in Gauhati and in New Delhi. The
general opinion of the press was that the low voter turnout and the boycott of the elections by various parties and groups considerably reduced the significance of the whole exercise. Though Congress (I) won, it was a pyrrhic victory. As such, the ministry could be regarded as a trustees charged with the duty of restoring normality, rehabilitating the distressed and resuming the threads of negotiations. The administration should adopt a specific mandate and pledge to seek fresh elections as soon as a solution of the Assam question was in sight. This general opinion of the local and national press proved prophetic, as coming events would show.

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