CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

The movement spearheaded by the AASU on the foreigners' issue created such a social commotion which was not felt by the press, political parties and public but all were seriously involved in the process. Since the very movement challenged the entire social fabric of Assam. Despite such an unprecedented movement which continued for six years, the state of Assam, the miniature India, is not free from problems. The press in Assam, no doubt, highlighted the problems, but it hardly helped in getting the problems solved. An attempt is made in the thesis to understand the viewpoints of the different parties and examine the role of the Press in the complex and the confused situation.

Assam has been the target of invisible invasion from across the borders even since independence. The unabated influx of foreign nationals both Hindus and Muslims from neighbouring east Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and distant Nepal has drastically changed the demographic profile of Assam. The Assamese people harbour genuine fears that they would be completely swamped by the Bengalis in the not too distant future. In spite of the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950, the problem of illegal influx acquired larger and larger proportions as years went by. Refugees from East Pakistan poured into the State in their thousands. But apart from the regular flow of displaced persons from East Pakistan, clandestine influx from across the border continued. Further
during the Bangladesh war lakhs of refugees entered Assam and no one knows how many of them stayed back. As Hiteswar Saikia said in the interview, "The movement was the expression of apprehensions that the socio-cultural identity of the Assamese people and also their economic life were being threatened by the presence of a large number of foreigners in the State". The geo-political isolation of the area made the problem more acute.

In Assam it has always been left for the students to break the deep slumber of the Government. Whether Assam needed a State language, a refinery, a Brahmaputra Bridge or anything, it was for the students to agitate and Assam got it. The representatives of the All Assam Students Union (AASU) held a conference in July 1978 at Jorhat and prepared a 16-point list of demands, including the identification and deportation of illegal foreign nationals from Assam. In March 1979 a by election was held following the death of Hiralal Patowary, a Janata M.P. from Mangaldoi constituency of Darrang district. There were about 6 lakhs voters in that constituency and objections were raised against about 70,000 names as foreigners. The Chief Election Commissioner directed the Government of Assam to take necessary steps to correct the voters list. The Chief Minister Golap Borbora set up a tribunal which declared 45,000 as foreigners. This news transmitted a shockwave among the Assamese people. That was the starting point of the movement. The AASU called a meeting of
all organisations who were actively in support of the demand for deletion of names of aliens from the electoral rolls. It was decided to give a wider base to the agitation. For that purpose All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was formed on August 17, 1979 with representatives of AASU and other regional political parties and socio-cultural organisations.

After the fall of the Janata Governments, the President of India called for a mid-term election to be held at the end of December 1979 to elect Members of Parliament in all States of India. For this election, preparation of voters list started all over the country including Assam. But the people and the press in Assam demanded that foreign nationals must be dropped from the electoral rolls and until that happened the election should be postponed in Assam. During the entire movement the press in Assam played a significant role though sometimes prejudiced and onesided, by highlighting the demographic aggression and the Government's failure in its constitutional duty to stop the illegal immigration. The Assam Press supported the appeal by the AASU and the AAGSP to the political parties not to file nominations. On by the Bengali dominated Cachar district did not listen to the appeal. The leaders of the movement realized that oil was a powerful weapon which could be used to put effective pressure on the Government. The oil blockade started on December 27, 1979 got the attention of the Press and the people
After her return to power Mrs. Indira Gandhi decided to hold talks with agitation leaders. The fact that the centre chose to invite only AASU and AAGSP for the talks clearly showed that it considered these two organisations as the acknowledged spokesmen of the Assamese people. This invitation was a shot in the arm of the movement leaders and was simultaneously a challenge to them to prove their bona fides and help find a solution to the aliens issue. The AASU, AAGSP formula demanded detection of all the post-1952 entrants, while Mrs. Gandhi did not prepare to go beyond 1971. The talks failed.

Hiteswar Saikia observed, "I could not convince myself at any stage during the currency of the movement that the students had any clear idea of a solution to the problem of foreigners already present in the state. There was confusion on what they used to call a cut-off year and it was a pretty long time before they finally came to accept 1971, as announced by the Government, as the base year. Had this been accepted earlier, the movement would have been over years back".² Tilak Hazarika, the then editor of Asom Bani said in the interview that the student leaders had no clear idea of the vastness of the problem as well as the real solution of it."³ However the local press contributed a great deal to mass upsurge. The Assam Tribune, The Dainik Asam, The Janamabhumi, these dailies became the bitter cri-
tics of the futile and directionless efforts of the Government to find a solution to the burning problem. The language weeklies and bi-weeklies like the Assam Bani and Akadoot encouraged the movement leaders to carry on the agitation for the sake of the Assamese sub-nationality. Though oil blockade was lifted with the help of Army personnel in November, 1980, it was during Mrs. Anwara Taimur's Congress(I) Ministry that attitudes of the people and the press hardened to a degree that there was no going back.

The newspapers depicted her Ministry as a foreign Government, because the agitationists encountered strong opposition from the administration during this period than they had earlier. The press expressed resentment against the imposition of the Assam special powers (Press) Act. Talks continued but differences could not be narrowed down. The Assam press praised the movement leaders for their pragmatic approach shown in their view that they were prepared to retain the pre-1961 entrants. The press did not however give up their penchant for legalistic hairsplitting and did not put much value on humanitarian considerations and international commitments.

The months that followed the fall of the Taimur Ministry in June, 1981 were a confusing period. Terror tactics relaxed when another congress (I) Ministry led by Keshab Gogoi was installed in January, 1982. But Gogoi's fate was sealed with the dissension of the group of legislators loyal to Mrs. Taimur.
Gogoi's fall in March, 1982 changed the entire picture. He recommended dissolution of the assembly, the Governor said 'yes'.

Under the constitution the election had to be held within a year. The die was East. The local press was concerned with the futile action that took place on the negotiation front even though new the opposition parties too joined in. The papers were not optimistic about the outcome of the ongoing tripartite talks mainly because of the Assam leaders' insistence on detection and dispersal of those who entered the state between 1961 and 1971.

The Government did not favor dispersal of all entrants between 1961-71, 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. All the leading newspapers in Assam urged the Government to realise that once illegal immigrants were allowed to participate in the elections, the whole objective of the movement would be lost. They advised the centre not to hold any poll at gunpoint but to resolve the issue of aliens without delay. Some left oriented papers like the Janakranti, Kalakhar, etc., appreciated New Delhi's belated determination to resist being held to ransom by the extremists of the Assam movement and pointed out that their intransigence was standing in the way of the state's economic development.

While talks were going on, violence never ceased. Sri
Tilak Hazarika, the then editor of Assam Bani, said, "The wrath against the foreigners found its expression in hatred and for that matter violence against the minorities both religious and linguistic took place. But he added, "it was a non-violent movement primarily, but momentarily it went out of the professed character, probably due to involvement of many quarters and many factors." It is obvious that some divisive, secessionist, communalist and racist forces took advantage of the eagerness of the Assamese people for the immediate solution of the problem and resorted to loot, arson and killings. But in 1983 February elections, Assam's image as a multicultural secular state lay shattered. The very problem of Assam was changed with inhuman carnage. Thousands were killed in Nellie, Mangaldoi, Silipather and Gohpur. Lakhs of people were rendered homeless. While the local papers expressed shock, they unanimously observed that the Government could have avoided such a bloodshed had they allowed humanitarianism to overshadow their political ambitions. According to Hiteswar Saikia, the highly partisan and provocative reporting in the local press was largely responsible for hiatus and bitterness amongs various ethnic groups living in Assam.".

But R.N. Baruah, editor of the Assam Tribune thinks that the real movement leadership stood by non-violence but in such a widespread movement it is not surprising that the less tolerant would turn violent, "Moreover, he says," "The Calcutta newspapers'
wrong interpretation of the basic aims of the movement generated a feeling of animosity towards the linguistic minorities. As Bengali speaking areas of Assam, such as Cachar and Pockets like Hojoi, Lumding did not join the movement, the wrath increased. 6 Sri Barooah differs from Hiteswar Saikia and holds that "the local press behaved with commendable restraint in spite of provocative writings by mainly the Calcutta papers. A few reports in local press could however have done some damage".

But Barooah's defence does not stand in view of the silence of the local papers on the atrocities perpetrated on the religious and linguistic minorities. Hiteswar Saikia aptly observes, "while most of the newspapers, particularly the state level papers, had chosen not to be critical about the agitational programmes and had unquestioningly started acting like unofficial organs of the movement, a small section of the papers had tried to view things in the proper perspective. I won't say that the newspapers that got directly involved in the movement used, to carry false or baseless reports all the time, but the tendency was clearly towards exaggeration and they used to blow up or underplay their stories in the interest of sustaining the agitation. Naturally, the reports and views circulated by these newspapers often proved to be provocative and tended to whip up communal passions and sectarian feelings. The small section of papers that tried to criticise the agitational prog-
ravines had to face threats and intimidation. 8

The press in Assam observed that the Hiteswar Saikia Ministry lacked the necessary politically will to face the issue and solve it. So the easiest course was adopted and things were allowed to drift. The language newspapers were also bitterly critical of the Government's strong arm measure to stifle dissent and suppress any kind of opposition to election. Barring the isolated Cachar, all other districts responded to the call of non-co-operation with election in varying but substantial degrees. The significant question involved in this election was not as to who won how many seats but how many votes were cast at all and where. While the Union Home Minister P.C. Sethi claimed that the final voting average was 33.7 percent, the press described this statement as sweeping and misleading because the overall percentage of poll 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 others pockets in the state. The criticism of the Union Government and illegitimate State Government was a regular feature of the editorials of the leading papers of the state. A few left oriented papers like Janakranti, Janamat and Kalakhar were critical of the agitation on the ground that it created anxiety and harrassment among the linguistic and religious minorities.
But these views were not entertained by the majority of the Assamese people and the press. As a consequence these left-oriented papers lost credibility among the general people belonging to the Assamese community. The leading dailies and bi-weeklies and weeklies never criticised the movement leaders for the series of strikes, arson, violence and genocide. The main thrust of the editorials was that the great tragedy would not have taken place if the central Government had not imposed unwanted elections on the people. For them a Government produced in this way was an insult to the Assamese people.

The atmospheres of panic and feeling of insecurity were not over. Even the Chief Minister feared threat of life. But he was determined not to submit to any kind of pressure or terror tactics. Bomb blasts, arson, assault and killings continued. But for the local papers, the return to normalcy would depend on detection and deportation of aliens. The Government of Hiteswar Saikia lost contact with the majority of the Assamese people. But by degrees Mr. Saikia meticulously evolved a proper strategy and it was not long before the new ministry succeeded in taking much of the wind out of the sails of agitators. The press played a crucial role during this period. The Sentinel was aggressively fanatical in criticism of the Government at the centre and the state. The News Star was moderate in
expressing its views and had no hesitation in acknowledging the achievements of the Saikia Ministry in the sphere of normalisation of relations. The Assam Tribune wanted all right thinking men to rise to the occasion and strive to restore mutual trust and to save the age old values.

Hiteswar Saikia tried to infuse dynamism and dedication into the administrative machinery. The local press took up the cause of the agitators and demanded a mutually agreed solution to the foreigners problem. The role of the Agradoot in inciting the people against the Government cannot be underestimated. It criticised the Assamese intellectuals who considered the agitation as a signpost to final fragmentation and disappearance of the Assamese identity. Sri Kanak Sen Deka, the editor of the Agradoot has admitted in the interview that though the people in general participated in the movement spontaneously there were cases where people were pressurised by the movement leaders to support them. The editor was coercing the people through his columns during the agitation and highlighting the agonies of Assam, some real and some imaginary. But the central Government was not indifferent to Assam. The illegal Migrant (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983, was enacted to provide for the establishment of tribunals for the determination if a person was illegal migrant. Since the object of the Act was to detect illegal migrants who entered India on or after the 25th March
1971 without valid documents, the local press was terribly unhappy. The language newspapers, in their articles and editorials, were, day in and day out, trying to awaken the regional consciousness, and appealed to the people to carry on the agitation till demands were met. Although the spurt of violence synchronised with the resumption of the movements, the local newspapers did not link the violent incidents to the agitation. They criticised all political parties for their indifference to the burning issue of Assam. As a consequence, as Bharat Narah says, "people lost all confidence in political parties. There was no alternative to the leadership of AASU".10

The assassination of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 31st December 1984 culminating in serious riots in different parts of the country overshadowed Assam's smouldering problem. Sri Rajib Gandhi was sworn in as Prime Minister; Lok Sabha elections were announced to be held on December 24 and 27 except in Assam and Punjab. Under the leadership of Sri Rajib Gandhi, Congress(I) recorded a landslide victory and he became the undisputed leader of the party and Prime Minister of India. He started making earnest efforts for the settlement of the burning issue of Assam. The memorandum of settlement synchronised with the 39th Independence Day and brought a sense of relief to the people of Assam. According to it, foreigners who entered Assam on or after March 25, 1971, should be detected, deleted and expelled in accordance
with law, but while pre-1966 entrants will be regularised, those who came between 1.1.66 and 25.3.1971 will be disenfran-
chised for 10 years and registered. There is a clause to safe-
guard the cultural and linguistic identity of the Assamese peo-
ple. It ensures security against future infiltration and envi-
sages economic development of Assam by establishing an oil re-
finary, re-opening Ashok paper Mill and Jute Mill and setting up
I.I.T.

In pursuance of an unwritten clause of the accord,
Hiteswar Saikia's Ministry was reduced to a smaller size and con-
tinued as a caretaker Government. On October 14, 1985 a new re-
gional party, the Asom Gana Parishad, comprising pro-movement
and pro-accord parties was formed. The formation of the new re-
gional party was the culmination of the efforts made by AASU le-
aders to forge political unity among the pro-movement elements
in the state. Meanwhile United Minority front (UMF) a new polit-
ic organisation was formed resulting in withdrawal by minori-
ties of their support to the Congress (I). The minorities
felt that the Congress party sacrificed their interests to pan-
der to the wishes of the majority Assamese speaking people of
the Brahmaputra valley. The U.M.F. added a new dimension to
the political situation in the state. The chances of the AGP
brightened. The Congress (I) tried desperately to woo and win
back the confidence of the immigrants and minorities but failed
because of the Accord which produced in their minds a sense of fear, uncertainty and anxiety. The AGP was voted to power and Sri Prafulla Kumar Mahanta took the path as Chief Minister on December 24 in presence of lakhs of people in the Nehru Stadium. Sri R.N. Barooah, Editor of the Assam Tribune aptly said in the interview, "The AASU may be a jumping board for future politicians. In the past students' associations were the cradles of party politicians, AASU may therefore be regarded as the school for the regional party politicians". The AGP emerged from the ashes of strong regional forces which constantly struggled for protecting the interests of the ethnic Assamese. The State politics would therefore be influenced accordingly. The agitation woke up the Assamese from their deep slumber and made them conscious of their rights. It also made them aware of the threat their culture and economic interests faced in the context of the continuing immigration from across the Bangladesh boarders as well as from other parts of the country. The Accord marked the end of the agitation. The agitation leaders have now to play a new role with fresh goals to achieve. The new party provides them with the requisite political machinery. But in this context the press must play a constructive role.

Though at first all the newspapers of Assam were happy with the Accord, later they admitted that the euphoria over the accord was unwarranted, for the memorandum of settlement gave
the Assamese people very little. But all the papers were unanimous in holding the view that the dissolution of the Assembly was a great moral victory of the movement leadership.

The press exhibited differences in the understanding of the logic of Assam's antiforeigners upsurge. The criticism of the movement in the leftist papers was centred on its reactionary middle class leadership and the fascist and authoritarian tendencies displayed in course of the prolonged agitation. They agreed with the views of the Congress (I) that the movement encouraged the growth of communal feelings and checked the process of assimilation of various groups of people in Assam. But leading Newspapers of Assam disagreed with these views and supported the agitation on the ground that the cultural national identity of the Assamese people was swamped by the Bengali influx. The conflict and contradiction that characterised the approach to the Assam problem were reflected in the inability of the newspapers to come forward with a clear analysis of the Assam agitation, the factors leading to it, the class character of the Assamese society and the national question involved. The Newspapers belonging to leftist parties and the Congress saw the growth of ultra-nationalism in the movement as a threat to the development of the Assamese nation. The pro-movement Newspapers emphasised that the fear of the Assamese of being reduced to a minority in their own state and of losing their culture and language could not be dismissed.
as xenophobia. Assam movement should be viewed as the outburst of a nationality which had a long history of neglect, suppression and exploitation. The Assam problem did not originate suddenly. There was much more to the malignant strife in Assam than merely foreign nationals issue. Even this problem meant different things to different people. The Assam Accord left many dissatisfied. The agitation leadership has now come to power. But the condition is likely to be complicated if the Government does not take into account the facts of the situation. Corrective steps must be taken to create harmony and peace in spite of diversities. The press can play a leading role in the promotion of national integration. It can highlight the needs of this region in order to bridge the gap between Assam and the rest of the country. This is important and urgent if the feeling of alienation and neglect is to be removed from the minds of the people. As Kuldip Nayar aptly remarks, "The real problem with Assam is not foreigners. It is a slogan that goes down well. Essentially it is a feeling of neglect—economic backwardness and a growing consciousness that the identity of Assam is in danger". Dr. Birendra Kumar Bhattacheryya aptly observed, "If we look from a national point of view, the composite Assamese nationality is also a 'minority'. It is not only numerically smaller than the Muslims or the Bengalis but also has a weaker socio-economics base. The basic cause of the present movement is this. In countries like Soviet Russia and China such small nationalities are
given special safeguards. The composite Assamese nationality is composed of various ethnic groups whose identities are also to be respected and harmoniously integrated. The problem of minorities in Assam and India cannot be solved through parochial mobilisation, but through scientific discussions.  

REFERENCES:
1. Interview with Sri Hiteswar Saikia (see Appendix).
2. Ibid.
3. Interview with Sri Tilak Hazarika.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Interview with Sri Rabindra Nath Barooah, Editor The Assam Tribune.
7. See Interview with H. Saikia and R. N. Barooah.
8. Interview with H. Saikia.
9. Interview with Sri Kanak Sen Deka.
10. Interview with Sri Bharat Narah.
11. Interview with Sri R. N. Barooah.