Chapter 5

GOALPARA: THE MIXED IDENTITY

The identity of the District of Goalpara was embedded in the cross-currents of the history of Bengal and Assam. The district since its incorporation into the Province of Assam participated in the general political activities of the Brahmaputra Valley. Raja Prabhat Chandra Barua of Gauripur took active part in the political activities of the Brahmaputra Valley and became the President of the Assam Association. In 1905 he presided over the first session of the Association held at Dibrugarh. Assam Association served as the mouth-piece of the people of the Brahmaputra Valley. Unlike the traditional raijmels or village assemblies of Assam proper, the Association served as a broad-based platform and resorted to the constitutional agitations in the form of payers and petitions. The Association had its permanent district branch in Goalpara. In 1904 the general meeting of the Association held at Gauripur under the presidentship of Prabhat Chandra Barua opposed the proposal of incorporation of the districts of Dacca and Mymensingh into Assam. The meeting held that the type of highly developed form of Government established in Bengal, localised and impersonal, was not suitable for the backward province of

1. Guha, op. cit., pp. 63-64
Assam. The Goalpara Branch of the Assam Association, however, suggested the incorporation of North Bengal districts into Assam on the basis of their proximity of race, religion and language with lower Assam. 3

A section of the people of the district, particularly the permanent-settlement-holder Zamindars were, however, not satisfied with their position in Assam administration and a movement emanated from them for the transfer of Goalpara to Bengal. 4 The demand for a separate administrative arrangement for the district got an organized platform on 15 December, 1919 when the 'Goalpara Association' was formed. This Association not only demanded the inclusion of Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Goalpara-Bihar but also claimed the amalgamation of all the plains districts of Assam with Bengal. 5 The Assam Association's hold over the district also suffered a serious setback when Prabhat Chandra Barua championed the cause of the Zamindari Association of Goalpara and demanded amalgamation of the district with Bengal. 6 On 27-29 December, 1919 the Assam Association's Annual Session at Goalpara was boycotted by the local Bengalees at the

3. Letter dated, Gauripur, the 15th February, 1904 from Prabhat Chandra Barua, Report on Bengal and Assam, or. cit., pp. 34-36


6. ibid., p. 218
instance of Goalpara Zamindars. In face of that many of the Goalpara members severed their connection with the Assam Association.

On the eve of the Montague-Chelmsford reforms the All India Landholders' Association raised the demand for special representation of the landholders. It claimed 'a substantial, adequate and proper representation' of the landholders in various councils of British Indian provinces. The Association, in view of their leading position and great stake on land, demanded separate representation for their interests. The landholders of India were opposed to communal representation and advocated for special representation of the special interests. Regarding the permanent settlement the Association claimed proper safeguard through statutory declaration against any interference by any popular Government - Provincial or Central, present or future in India. These demands, in the context of Assam, were examined by the Chief Commissioner of Assam, who found them to be untenable. About the separate electorate for the Goalpara Zamindars it appeared hardly acceptable since their number was too small. A separate electorate for seven families, viz., Bijni, Sidli, Gauripur, Mechpara, Chapar, Parbatjoar and Parai-bari was considered as too heavy a demand. The Chief Commissioner anticipated that these great Zamindars would be able to secure

7. Copy of the Resolution passed at a Meeting of the All India Landholders Association, held at Simla on the 5th August, 1918, Indian Constitutional Reforms, Government of India Despatch of March 5, 1919 and connected papers.
at least one Hindu seat of the district in the Council. The Government, however, agreed to nominate one of them to the Council whenever an important Bill connected with the district would come up for discussion.\(^8\) The cause of the permanent-settlement-holders of Assam was also raised by the British Indian Association and the Secretary of the Association in his letter dated 28 September 1918 to the Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal advocated the adhesion of the permanently-settled tracts of Assam to Bengal. This transfer was claimed on the basis of identity of language, land system and stage of development of the areas.\(^9\) The Zamindars of Goalpara also submitted a memorandum to the Viceroy in 1919 seeking the inclusion of the district in Bengal.\(^10\) Prabhat Chandra Barua issued a pamphlet justifying the demand on socio-economic ground. It was argued that if Sylhet were to be separated, Goalpara also needed to be separated on similar grounds. With a view to win the support of the ryots he assured the extension of the Bengal Tenancy Act to the district. He made the demand an emotional one by raising the issue of the language of the district and demanded replacement of Assamese by Bengali in

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8. N.D. Beatson Bell's Note on Indian Constitutional Reforms with Special Reference to Assam, 28 February, 1918, p. 11


the schools. The demand for separation of the district was not unanimous and counter memorandum was submitted.

Goalpara and the Reformed Council:

One of the golden rules of the British administrative management in Assam was to maintain the balance between the two valleys in matters of entertaining claims. This policy guided the formation of the Reformed Council in Assam. Out of thirty nine elected seats thirty two seats were equally distributed between the two valleys. Goalpara in the context of the valleys was, for all practical purposes, treated as a Brahmaputra Valley district. It was, thus, made to share the privileges as well as the fruits of development of that valley. In the Reformed Council the district got four of the valley seats. These seats were distributed equally to the non-Muhammadan and the Muhammadan communities of the district. 24,323 non-Muhammadan voters elected two councillors from Dhubri and Goalpara rural constituencies and 7,832 Muhammadan voters elected two councillors from Goalpara and Dhubri rural constituencies.

13. Ibid., p. 95

* 39 elected seats were: 33 territorial constituencies (Assam Valley- 16, Surma Valley- 16, General Urban (Shillong)- 1); 5 Planting constituencies (Assam Valley- 3, Surma Valley- 2) and Commerce and Industry of the Province- 1. - Report on the Administration of Assam 1921-22, op.cit., p. 97
voters elected two councillors from Dhubri and Goalpara-cum-South Salma rural constituencies. Of the four Muhammadan constituencies of the valley the district alone held two. The sharing of the council seats among the Brahmaputra Valley districts and Goalpara was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Non-Muhammadan seats</th>
<th>Muhammadan seats</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Report on the Administration of Assam for the Year 1921-22, Shillong, 1923, p. 97

In the first Reformed Council Biraj Mohar Dutta and Dhairyya Narayan Das were elected from the non-Muhammadan rural constituencies through multi-cornered contests, while Abdul Latif and Munshi Safiur Rahman were returned uncontested from

the Muhammadan constituencies. In the second council non-Muhammadan constituencies were represented by Bipin Chandra Ghose and Biraj Mohan Dutta and the Muhammadan constituencies were represented by Abdul Masid Ziaossahams and Mafisuddin Ahmed. As a district unit Goalpara remained well-represented in the legislative council of Assam.

The councillors of Goalpara generally accepted the Brahmaputra Valley's developmental issues as their own. In the socio-economic field, the general development of the district was tied up with that of the Brahmaputra Valley. In the budget discussion of 1922 the councillor of the district criticised the Government for making inadequate provisions for education in the valley of Brahmaputra in comparison to those of the Surma Valley. The representatives also demanded a just share for and due recognition of Assam in the management of the High Court at Calcutta as well as in the Calcutta University. Keeping in view the interests of Assam, the Goalpara councillor claimed a few appointments for the natives of Assam in the Calcutta High Court, at least in the subordinate ranks, as the province made the usual contribution of the maintenance of the same. It urged the Government of Assam to assert itself in the management of the Calcutta University.

15. The Assam Gazette, December 8, 1920 and December 15, 1920
16. ibid., dated November 14, December 5 and December 12,
17. ALCD, 1922, vol. II, pp. 132-33
18. ALCD, 1923, vol. III, p. 266
In the field of recruitment to the Government services the fate of the native Hindu population of the district was welded to the general Assamese community of the province. Thus in the statement of the recognised separate communities the Bengali-speaking population of Goalpara, excepting the residents born in Bengal, was classed as Assamese. The Bengali-speaking population of the province was, as such, granted multi-divisional status. The Bengalees of the district of Cachar and Sylhet were distinguished from the domiciled and not domiciled Bengalees of Assam for appointments and were granted separate proportions. In view of their position, the Goalpara Hindu councillors viewed the issue independently and moved the Government through the Legislative Council to introduce competitive examination for recruiting Extra Assistant Commissioners and Sub-Deputy Collectors of the province. The move was, however, opposed in the Council. The representatives of other communities, particularly the Assamese and the Muhammadans, viewed the method unworkable in Assam as education had made uneven progress. They, rather advocated for the continuation of the protective system. The resolution for change was ultimately defeated with eight votes in favour and thirty three against.

The role of the Goalpara councillors in the pre-reformed Council on the opium issue was dubious. The district being in the valley of the Brahmaputra was free from the abuse of opium. It was the least opium affected district of the province. The Kacharís and the hill tribes of the district were fond of a liquor prepared by them from rice and a small portion of them was in the habit of use of the drug. Thus the councillors of the district remained less enthusiastic in the fight against the Government's opium policy. On 9 April, 1920 the Zemindar member of Goalpara played a passive role and voted against a resolution which sought to introduce registration of the opium eaters of the province to check the menace. In the Reformed Council, however, the councillors of the district played an encouraging role and expressed their solidarity with the Brahmaputra Valley councillors and fought against the evil that was ruining Assam. So far as the developmental issues were concerned, the district followed the Brahmaputra Valley agenda and remained the least clamorous in this regard. The councillors, however, entertained the feeling that their developmental claims had been overlooked.

22. Guha, op.cit., p. 91
23. ALCD, 1925, vol. V, p. 1141
24. ALCD, 1926, vol. VI, p. 409
Goalpara's distinct position in the context of Assam proper was reflected in its permanently-settled areas. This part containing about 2571 square miles out of the total of 3954 square miles of the district, was held by several Zamindars as proprietors with fixed revenue under the permanent settlement of 1793. The following table shows the areas of the different Zamindari Parganas and the amount of revenue payable by them.

### Table No. 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Proprietors</th>
<th>Name of Estates or Parganas</th>
<th>Area in Sq. miles</th>
<th>Revenue payable Rs.-A-P</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bijni Rani</td>
<td>Habraghat and Kuntaghat</td>
<td>942.63</td>
<td>2355-1-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauripur Raja</td>
<td>Ghurla, Jamira, Makrampur and Aurangabad</td>
<td>423.54</td>
<td>3299-11-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauripur Raja</td>
<td>Kalumalupara</td>
<td>54.98</td>
<td>1706-11-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kayarpar</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13- 8-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neabad Faturi</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>11-12-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dhubri</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>25-10-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechpara Zamindars</td>
<td>Mechpara</td>
<td>399.21</td>
<td>2105-10-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taluk Goalpara</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>59-14-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dekdhoa</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>25- 0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dhar Brahmaputra</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>45- 0-0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contd.

The interests of the big Zamindars as well as the tenants of this area of the district were different from those of the rest of the province excepting Sylhet. The problems and the issues of this part also created contradictions within the district itself. The interests of the tenants as well as the Zamindars remained poles asunder. The Government, however, initiated a spadework in 1916 to extend the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 in the permanently settled areas of the district in order to ameliorate the conditions of the tenants. But the attempt failed due to the opposition of the local Zamindars. The Governor, then proposed to prepare a record-of-rights as a prelude to the tenancy legislation in the permanently-settled
areas of the province. However, this effort also had to be abandoned avowedly on financial stringency. The tenants in the permanently settled areas unlike the ryots of the temporarily settled areas continued to labour under disadvantageous conditions. In the wake of the Non-cooperation Movement some tenants of the district refused to pay rents to the Zamindars, forcing the latter to seek help from the Government. The Government readily extended its help and introduced "The Assam Landlord and Tenant Procedure (Amendment) Bill, 1922." The Bill was supported by the Zamindars of Sylhet as they also faced similar threats. The councillors in general were, however, opposed to the spirit of the Bill. The elected councillors of Goalpara opposed the Bill on the ground that the interests of the tenants were overlooked for safeguarding the interests of a handful of Zamindars.

Before the tenure of the first Reformed Council came to an end it received a note from the Governor which highlighted the urgent need for a tenancy legislation for the permanently settled areas. During the working of the second Council (1924-26) the problems of the permanently-settled areas were raised in the Council by the newly elected Muslim councillor

27. ALCD, 1922, vol. II, p. 566
28. ibid., pp. 568-69
29. ALCD, 1923, vol. III, Governor's Prorogation Address, p. 698
Abdul Masid Ziaossaham. He moved a resolution on 11 September, 1925 seeking immediate amendment or recasting of the Act VIII of 1869, that is, the Tenancy Law in force in the districts of Goalpara and Sylhet. He explained the pathetic condition of the tenants and suggested measures in this regard. The councillors of Sylhet opposed the move and got their district exempted from the purview of the resolution. Its landlord lobby in the Council claimed that there had not been any agitation for such a measure in their district, and left Goalpara to have its own change. The motion in the context of Goalpara was carried by 17 to 16 votes.

A major breakthrough to tenant's demand came in 1927 when Goalpara Tenancy Bill was introduced in the Council. The Zamindar councillors of Goalpara, one elected and the other nominated, tried their best to postpone the consideration of the Bill till 1929, that meant, up to the publication of the report of the Indian Statutory Commission. The cause of the Goalpara ryots was forcefully and emotionally advocate by Nabin Chandra Bordoloi in the Council. In this juncture the landlords' lobby of Sylhet extended their support to the Zamindars.

31. ibid., pp. 1534-35
32. ibid., p. 1540
33. ALCD, 1927, vol. VII, p. 980; Asomiya, Gauhati, July 24, 1927
of Goalpara and suggested its postponement. The Sylhet councilors termed the support of the Assam Valley to the Bill as an act of antipathy towards Goalpara landlords as the latter sided with Bengali culture. The Brahmaputra Valley councilors, however, remained steadfast to the cause of the tenants of Goalpara and explained as follows:

"We are not against Bengali culture. We do not care whether Bengali culture comes to Assam or not. In this present case we are concerned with the conditions of the tenants. Is it believed for a moment that if the condition of the tenants improve they would discard the Bengali culture? If the tenants are really in favour of Bengali culture then certainly they will improve the Bengali culture along with their own improved condition. Is it supposed that Bengali culture can be forced on the tenants only if their condition remains poor and is miserable as it is at present.

So, Sir, I think the prejudice is not with us, the prejudice is not with the Assamese people who want to have a prosperous Assamese tenancy. The prejudice, I think,

34. ibid., p. 982
is with those who are excessively attached to Bengali culture.  

The Goalpara Tenancy Bill ultimately emerged through the Select Committee in a diluted form and was presented to the Council in 1929. The Goalpara Tenancy Act 1929 for the first time granted the occupancy rights to the tenants who held lands for a period of more than twelve years. It also relieved the tenants from arbitrary enhancement of rents. The support of the Assamese councillors to the measures helped to extend their influence over the tenants of the district. The Act provided that in no case the rent would be enhanced by more than three annas at a time. The Swarajists, however, tried their best to limit the enhancement to two annas but failed.  

The Government effort to enhance the local rate in the permanently-settled areas was another bone of contention between the permanently settled areas and the temporarily-settled districts of Assam. The local rates were introduced under the Local Rates Regulation of 1879 with the aim of raising the local funds for local purposes. Under it all the landholders had to pay a cess in addition to land tax. The fund realised under it was to be utilised for the work of provincial importance as well as of the districts. The imposition of this rate on land was

35. ibid., Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri, p. 985
36. Guha, op. cit., p. 201
37. Rao, V.V., Local Self-Government in Assam, Bani Prakash, Gauhati, 1973, p. 56
treated by the permanent-settlement-holders of the province is an infringement of the rights of permanent settlement-holders. They claimed exemptions from this levy and also from the joint responsibility imposed on them for the local rates assessed or land held by them. A resolution to do away with the practice of selling the permanently-settled estates for arrears of local rates was carried, in face of opposition, by 17 to 16 votes.\textsuperscript{3}\textsuperscript{P}

The rift between the temporarily settled districts and the permanently settled districts of Assam centering round the local rates came to the surface during the consideration of the Assam Local Rates (Amendment) Bill 1931. The Goalpara councillors took exceptions to the support of the Brahmaputra Valley councillors to the Government move to raise local rates in the permanently settled areas and accused them of sacrificing the interests of the people of Goalpara living with them in the same valley. Pramothesh Chandra Barua of Goalpara pointed out that the sub-division of Goalpara despite being smaller in area and population paid more local rates than the temporarily settled sub-division of Barpeta.\textsuperscript{3}\textsuperscript{P} He treated the Bill as a move to infringe the rights of the permanently settlement holders in the district.\textsuperscript{4}\textsuperscript{O} The pro-tenant councillor also viewed the move as an act of disfavour to the people of Goalpara who intended to live with Assam Valley for ever.\textsuperscript{4}\textsuperscript{I}

\textsuperscript{38.} ALCD, 1925, vol. V, pp. 1165, 1216
\textsuperscript{39.} ALCD, 1932, vol. XII, p. 291
\textsuperscript{40.} ibid., p. 699
\textsuperscript{41.} ibid., A.M. Ziaosshams, p. 723
The District of Goalpara and the Simon Commission:

The functioning of the Reformed Council in the province made the Zamindars of Goalpara apprehensive about the future security of the permanent settlement. The passing of the Goalpara Tenancy Act by the Council in face of their strong opposition made them all more apprehensive. For it they intensified the movement for the transfer of the district, particularly the permanently settled areas to Bengal. The Goalpara Zamindars like Prabhat Chandra Barua, the ex-President of the Assam Association, came forward to identify themselves as Bengalee and raised the language issue. The separation movement was tactfully tagged to the linguistic-cultural features of the district. The district actually belonged to the bilingual category with Assamese and Bengali speaking people.

The conflict between the Bengali and the Assamese, thus, changed its venue from Sylhet to Goalpara. The language issue led to a language controversy affecting the Assamese-Bengali relations in the district. In the Council election of 1926 a bonafide Assamese Swarajist candidate was defeated as he was suspected to be a Bengali sympathizer. Prabhat Chandra Barua and his other colleagues organised pro-Bengali agitation throughout the district. At this juncture, however, the Assam Sahitya

42. Asomiya, July 24, 1927
43. ALCD, 1925, vol. V, Saadulla's reply, p. 1211
Sabha came forward to play its unifying role and organised annual sessions in face of strong oppositions from the Goalpara Zamindars. The tenth session of the Sabha, held at Goalpara in October 1927, passed resolutions claiming retention of Goalpara in Assam. It also passed resolution for introduction of Assamese in the schools and Courts of the district. 44

In September 1927 the Goalpara Zamindars in a deputation to the Governor emphasised that their interests were not safe in the legislative Council of Assam. They claimed that their district should be transferred to Bengal or alternatively, the neighbouring districts of Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Koch-Bihar be amalgamated in Assam. In October, a meeting of the Goalpara District Association to claim the transfer resulted in a virtual split. 45 The pro-separation lobby of Goalpara in the Council, however, tried to link up their move with that of the district of Sylhet. They were convinced that in the eventuality of the transfer of Sylhet their claim for transfer would not be difficult to materialize. 46 While speaking in the Council in 1932 on the transfer of Sylhet Kumar Promothesh Chandra Barua explained that the transfer of Sylhet would be detrimental to the interests of the remaining permanently-settled areas of Assam. He further held that if the prevalence of a particular

45. Simon Commission Report, vol. XIV, pp. 77-78
46. ALCD, 1927, vol. VII, p. 977
land law, language or similarity with Bengal could be a solid ground for the transfer of Sylhet then the permanently settled Goalpara became equally entitled to the same treatment. The Goalpara Zamindars, thus, opposed the Brahmaputra Valley's move to transfer the district of Sylhet alone.47

A decisive move highlighting the regional features of the district came in 1929 when the Goalpara Zamindars Association presented its memorandum to the Royal Commission on constitutional reforms in India. It demanded the amalgamation of the permanently settled Goalpara with Bengal. The memorandum traced the historical evolution of the district and claimed that all its affinities like traditional, cultural, ethnic, linguistic and social of the large majority of the population had with the people of Bengal and not of Assam. The main contention of the Zamindars was that they possessed no representation in the Legislative Council of Assam and hence demanded the keeping of the enactment of the Goalpara Tenancy laws in abeyance till their demand for the transfer finally disposed of.48 In the Committee, which was appointed by the Assam Legislative Council to co-operate with the Indian Statutory Commission, the Zamindar member of Goalpara could not agree with the general recommendation suggesting the withdrawal of the

47. ALCD, 1932, vol. XII, p. 651
territorial redistribution affecting Assam. The Goalpara Zamindar member disagreed to the recommendation that neither Sylhet nor any part of Goalpara would be transferred to Bengal. He found no reason in retaining the unwilling partners under the same administration. He favoured the transfer of Goalpara in view of strong feeling in the district in this regard.49

While the Zamindars tried to establish the Bengali aspects of the district the other segments of the population of Goalpara were forceful in asserting the prevalence of the pro-Assam and the Assamese features. Since 1919 a counter-movement was carried on to oppose the separation. The Bodo people, in particular, submitted their representation to the Government opposing the contentions of the Zamindars and their allies.50 The Bodos, the Garos and the Rabhas of the district jointly submitted a memorandum to the Governor on 8 August, 1928 requesting him not to transfer Goalpara against their will.51 The Bodos, in the Bodo Mahasammilan on 29 December 1927 opposed the separation move of Goalpara and demanded immediate enactment of the Goalpara Tenancy laws. The convention strongly recommended the introduction of Assamese as the language of the schools

and the Courts of the district. The Bodos disassociated themselves from the demands of the Goalpara Zilla Samiti in this regard. The Rabhas in the Assam Rabha Conference also voiced their opposition to the amalgamation move. The pro-Bengalee force under the leadership of Rabindra Narayan Chaudhury and Biraj Mohan Dutta, however, organised Gauripur Samiti and adopted resolutions claiming Bengali as the mother tongue of the district.

The anti-separation view of the district was presented before the Simon Commission by the Goalpara District Association under the leadership of Premathnath Chakraborty. In its memorandum the Association opposed the demand for territorial changes affecting the district. Contrary to the claims of the Zamindars the Association claimed that the district, historically, ethnologically and socially formed an integral part of Assam and identified the separation movement of the district as the brain child of a few interested parties. The Association viewed the transfer to Bengal as retrograding. The Bodo, the Garo and the Rabha inhabitants of the district also submitted their memorials to the Simon Commission opposing the move for transfer.

52. Asomiya, January 22, 1928
53. Bhuyan (ed.), op.cit., p. 298
54. Asomiya, November 27, 1927
The Government of Assam remained opposed to any territorial change in the province as it was convinced that once the process of dismemberment was agreed upon it would not stop with Sylhet or Goalpara alone. The Government disfavoured the suggestion of territorial recomposition of the province on the basis of language or race. Since the Simon Commission Report did not make any recommendation for territorial change in Assam, Goalpara remained within Assam.

Goalpara under the Government of India Act, 1935:

Under the Government of India Act, 1935 a bicameral legislature was formed in Assam with Assam Legislative Assembly and the Assam Legislature Council. The Assembly assumed twice the size of the old Legislative Council. It also came to be devoid of the nominated and the official members. In the Assam Legislative Assembly of 108 members, the Brahmaputra Valley seats were 49 including 4 plains tribal seats. Of the 29 general seats of the valley Goalpara occupied 5 seats. Out of 13 Muhammadan seats, the district held 5 seats. One of the most striking features of the new constitution was the provision for separate representation of the plains tribals of Assam. No fewer than 9 seats — 4 for the backward tribals of the plains

57. Bhuyan (ed.), op. cit., p. 300
58. Administrative Report of Assam, 1937-38, pp. 7-8
and 5 for the tribals of the partially Excluded hills - were allotted for them in the Assembly. The number of representatives from different districts of the Brahmaputra Valley and Goalpara in the Assam Legislative Assembly was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Scheduled Castes</th>
<th>Muhammadans</th>
<th>Plains Tribal</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Report on the Administration of Assam for the Year 1937-38, pp. 7-8

Goalpara and the Assam Legislative Assembly (1937-47):

The issues before the Assembly and the approaches to them during the period under review were distinguishable from the earlier ones. One of these was the issue relating to 'Line System'.

was first mooted in 1916 and adopted in 1920. Its purpose was to contain clashes between the immigrants, particularly those from East Bengal, and the autochthones. Under this policy lines were drawn in certain districts to demarcate the areas for the settlement of the immigrants. The Muhammadan members of the Assembly in general denounced the system and termed it as invidious, unjust, illogical, absurd and objectionable and viewed it as violative of political, economic and legal principles of nation building.

The 'Line System', though was not in force in Goalpara it generated tensions and created divisions amongst the members elected from the district. In 1937, Rupnath Brahma, the first plains tribals' representative of Goalpara opposed the resolution on the abolition of the "Line" and explained that it would adversely affect the interests of the tribal people of Assam. He defended the policy of restrictions on indiscriminate immigration into the province for safeguarding the rights of the sons of the soil. He advocated the introduction of the line system in Goalpara so that the backward tribes of the district could be protected from being outnumbered by the immigrants.

60. Guha, op.cit., p. 206
61. Report of the working of the Assam Legislative Assembly, op.cit., p. 7
63. ibid., p. 250
the Line System, the Goalpara ryots organised under the Goalpara Krishak Samiyan opposed the same. In the third session in May 1938, the Samiyan requested the Government not to introduce the system in the district. The Muhammadan representatives in the Assembly espoused the cause of the Bengalee immigrants and strongly advocated the abolition of 'Line System'. Kaulavi Matiur Rahman Mia, elected from the Goalpara West constituency, being himself an immigrant explained that immigrants were neither big Zamindars nor Rajas. They were not capitalist traders coming to conquer Assam as to be afraid of. They were no more than poor, illiterate and wretched cultivators entitled to sympathy. They had deserted their motherland, kith and kin and everything in search of shelter and land for living. He, on behalf of the immigrants, claimed that if the Europeans could get high plots of lands for tea cultivation and as many as fifteen lakhs of tea garden labourers could get lands for their settlement, there remained no real ground for the Bengalee Muslims to be deprived of the same facilities.

One major role of the district in the political field of Assam was the organisation of the peasant movements. The communal electorate system as provided by the Act of 1935 facilitated the devolution of the peasant movements of the Brahmaputra Valley on the grip of the Muslim League. This

65. Ripunjoy Singh's was the Secretary of the Samiyan. Tiri-Diniya Asomiya (Assamese), Gauhati, May 13, 1938
The Assam Tribal League Conference held on 16 June, 1938 at Kokrajhar discussed the burning issues of the province and recommended the retention of the Line System, reduction of land revenue in Assam up to fifty per cent, separation of Sylhet from Assam and inclusion of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur and Koch-Behar in Assam. The conference was a broad-based one and attended by Gopinath Bordoloi, Sir Muhammad Saadulla, the Premier, the Local self-Government Minister J.J.M. Nicholls Roy, and the tribal representatives like Rupnath Brahma, Dhirsingh Deuri, Karka Dolay, Miri and Rabi Chandra Kachari, along with the Muslim League members of Goalpara - Jahanuddin Ahmed and Ghyasuddin Ahmed. About fifteen hundred people including immigrants were present in the conference. The conference also assessed its political strength and assured support to the Ministry as long as it would protect the interests of the tribal people of the province. In the conference Gopinath Bordoloi advised the immigrants to accept Assam as their motherland and assimilate themselves with the Assamese. He also called for the immediate stoppage of further immigration into Assam and allotment of land to the immigrants who had already settled.64 The new development in the district was, thus, the emergence of the plains tribals as political force.

The controversial 'Line System' evoked mixed reactions among the people. While the plains tribal population favoured

64. Asomiya, Gauhati, June 21, 1938
occurred because the Muslim League had its influence over the immigrants, who constituted the bulk of the peasant community. For the Bengali Muslim settlers of the province a new and autonomous leadership slowly and silently emerged in Goalpara under Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan, commonly known as 'Bhasani'. He immigrated into the district in 1928. His organisation known as the Preja Sammilan in its Sirajgunj Session in December 1932 raised the demand for the abolition of Zamindaris. From 1928 to 1936 Bhasani undertook extensive work in the immigrant Muslims' villages and articulated the immigrants' demand for land. In 1937 he was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly from the south Muhammadan constituency of Dhubri in Goalpara.67 In order to curtail the rights of the permanent settlement holders as well as to provide substantial relief to the tenants through appropriate legislative measures Karuna Sindhu Roy of Sylhet and Abdul Hamid Khan of Goalpara introduced two tenancy Bills for their respective districts. At their initiative the Assembly ultimately adopted the Tenancy (Amendment) bills for Sylhet and Goalpara in 1943.68

Another issue that remained dormant during the period under examination was the movement of the district for its incorporation into Bengal on the basis of land laws and language. The movement received impetus from a new source. The new source

68. ibid., p. 246
was the Congress commitment to territorial redistribution of the provinces on linguistic basis. To preserve the Bengali identity the district representative resented the Government move to extend the scope of Assamese education through Education Department and viewed the move as an effort to turn the district into a predominantly Assamese district. In 1939 one representative raised the matter in the Assembly and explained the problem as follows:

"History never showed that by coercion and persuasion the mother tongue of a class has been changed. In these days of national advancement (I hope) no such attempt should be made by any one to thrust on us a language that is foreign to us." 69

A similar opposition to the imposition of Assamese language was echoed in the Goalpara Praja Samilan held at Ghagmarai in December 1940. In the struggle of linguistic identity a large section of the immigrants living in the district, however, remained more concerned with the acquisition of land rights than preservation of their mother tongue. 70

The introduction of provincial autonomy and granting of separate electorate to the plains tribal population opened the scope to the northern part of the district, i.e., the whole

70. Guha, op.cit., p. 259
of the Eastern Duars especially the areas covered by Bijni, Kokrajhar and Sidli thanas where plains tribes were dominant to assert their political existence. These people, hitherto unrepresented, came forward with their own demands as well as for their development at par with the rest of Assam Valley. The tribal representative expressed the feeling that none had cared to solve their problems. He, in course of his participation in the Assembly activities accused the leaders of the province as well as the Government for neglecting the legitimate demands of the backward people who were not represented in the legislature. In course of time the plains tribal representatives became politically important and viable unit. The district came to be represented in the Ministry by a tribal leader. In the first and the second Saadulla Ministries which consisted of five and six members respectively the Brahmaputra Valley as a whole was represented by only two members and both of them belonged to Kamrup district. It was in the first Gopinath Bordoloi Ministry of 1938-39 that Rupnath Brahma, an elected member of the plains tribal Constituency of Goalpara, was inducted. He subsequently continued as a Minister in the third, fourth and fifth Saadulla Ministry of the province. The representation of the Brahmaputra Valley district vis-a-vis the district of Goalpara in the Ministries was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministries</th>
<th>No. of Ministers</th>
<th>Brahmaputra Valley's representation</th>
<th>Goalpara</th>
<th>Assam Proper</th>
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<td>Kamrup</td>
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<td>1-4-37 to 4-2-38</td>
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<td>2. Gopinath Bordoloi</td>
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<td>19-9-38 to 16-11-39</td>
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<td>3. Saadulla Ministry</td>
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<td>17-11-39 to 24-12-41</td>
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<td>4. Gopinath Bordoloi</td>
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<td>25-12-41 to 23-3-45</td>
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<td>5. Gopinath Bordoloi</td>
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<td>11-2-46 to 14-8-47</td>
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*One Assam Valley Planter Representative.

The communal situation in Assam had never been tense but it deteriorated during the last year of the British rule. In this year the district of Goalpara faced hot up activities of the Muslim League. Bhasani, the Provincial League President contemplated to launch a civil disobedience movement in the province and sounded as to the qualitative and quantitative help of the Bengal's League leaders he could bank upon. He selected Dhubri, on the Assam Bengal border as the venue for his activities and convened a series of conferences of certain organisations like the Bengal-Assam Mujahadins, the Bengal-Assam National Guards, the Bengal-Assam Literary Conference and the committee for Action against Line System during 3-4 March, 1947. He established a centre at Mankarchar to train volunteers for a civil disobedience movement against the Line System of Assam. His activities, however, receded as soon as the prospect of Assam’s inclusion in the eastern wing of Pakistan faded.72 The appointment of the Boundary Commission under the Chairmanship of Sir Cyril Radcliffe to demarcate the Muslim and the non-Muslim majority areas offered scope to the Muslim League for claiming more areas from Assam to be included in Pakistan. It, thus, submitted a memorandum claiming large areas of Assam including Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Cachar and Goalpara on the basis of "other factors".73 A movement was

72. Guha, op.cit., pp. 317-18
73. Aditya, R.R., From Corridors of Memory, Karimganj, 1970, p. 32
also engineered by the Dhubri District Branch of Muslim League
claiming control over the plains of Garo Hills, Mankachar,
South Salmara, Dhubri and Bilasipara Police Stations. The
League's claim was countered by the nationalist leaders of the
Brahmaputra Valley. Hareswar Das, M.L.A. appealed to the
leaders of the Rajbansi community not to support the suicidal
agitation for the mutilation of Goalpara at the instance of
the Provincial Muslim League of Assam. In face of the move
to slice off at least a portion of Dhubri Sub-division, a fact
finding committee was formed in the district with Raja Ajit
Narayan Deb, M.L.A. as its President, Dinesh Chandra Barua as
the General Secretary, Ranjit Narayan Chaudhury, Zamindar of
Mechpara and Farbatjoar and Shyama Prasad Chakraborty as the
Joint Secretaries and Kumar Sailendra Narayan Deb as its
Treasurer. The district leaders, thus, fought tooth and
nail to retain its territorial integrity as well as for its
association with Assam. The Assam Jatiya Mahasabha also took
up the case of Goalpara and pleaded for its integrity. It
advised the Assam Provincial Congress Committee and the Assam
Government not to proceed with its claim on the non-Muslim
thanias of the Surma Valley which were contiguous to Assam
since "Assam can ill afford to fight for access to Lushai Hills
by prejudicing her case in respect of five vital thanias of
Goalpara in her very heart." Fortunately, Goalpara's

74. Assam Tribune, Gauhati, July 15, 1947
75. ibid., July 16, 1947
76. ibid., July 22, 1947
integrity as well as association with Assam were secured by the direction to the Boundary Commission that its terms of reference applied only to Sylhet and not to the district of Goalpara. 77

The District of Goalpara was generally welded to the greater fold of the Brahmaputra Valley identity. The special features of the district were carried by the permanent-settlement-holder Zamindars whereas the bulk of the inhabitants tied to the soil under them remained indifferent in this regard. In the temporarily settled portion of the district the plains tribal communities carried the Assam entity. In this cross-current the Goalpara Zamindars, unlike those of Sylhet, being very few in number could not carry the move for a separate identity.

77. ibid., August 5, 1947