Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that North East India formed a part of the Indian Hindudom since the ancient and the early medieval period and shared a broad regional identity. By 1200 A.D., the plain lands watered by the Brahmaputra was integrated into the Aryan-speaking India. The process of Aryanisation of the period also created a strong Hindu populace among the different ethnic communities of the land. The ethos carried by the ancient and the early medieval ruling houses, as well as enforced by them, brought structural integration of the valley societies with the pan-Indian socio-economic systems. The process of integration started in the western part and proceeded slowly towards the east. The pan-Indian socio-economic system, based on the extension of settled agriculture, growth of land owning class, trade and commerce, and above all the feudal model, was not adopted uniformly by all the entities of the North East. Several parallel and independent socio-economic and political systems continued to prevail and flourish side by side in this part of India. The powerful Praggyotisa and the Pamrups ruled maintained a happy blending of their authority with the claims of these systems and offered different degrees of autonomy to the small entities. Under the ancient and the early medieval State structure diverse ethnic systems of this region were allowed to exist and function according to their own ethos.
In the 'High' and the 'Late' medieval period the Brahmaputra Valley acquired the nomenclature "Assam" during the rule of the Ahoms. Six hundred years of Ahom rule transformed Assam into a strong and unique regional system and retained it against the mighty Mughal India. The Ahoms supplanting the rule of several indigenous entities unified them under a common rule. The powerful Ahom rulers became successful in providing an 'indelible model' of political administration for the northeastern territories. They followed a novel state policy to deal with the native powers as well as the neighbouring hill areas. The Ahom rule in fact laid the foundation of a successful policy towards the hill regions of the area. Their policy was based on mutual respect to each other and due recognition was accorded to the tribal entities. The dominant ethnic communities with autonomous existence and separate political areas of control also were given similar treatment.

The Ahom rule gave to the Assam Valley a new economic system which was in contrast to that of the rest of India. The Ahom system converted the land and its subjects into the property of the rulers. The ruling classes were remunerated with land and serving men in lieu of cash. The system kept the market economy of the Assam proper almost demonetised. The "semi-feudal and the semi-tribal" State structure of the Ahoms kept the serving masses in well guarded citadel, shut off from the influences of the outside world. In this regard the better organised peasant communities of western parts of Assam, viz.,
Kamrup and Darrang were also regarded as rebels to their system. During the Ahom period the western parts of Assam or the Lower Brahmaputra Valley remained as the periphery, the Central Assam as the semi-periphery, and the eastern Assam or the Upper Assam as the citadel or core of the Ahom politico-economic system. The long continued system of the Ahoms imposed a distinct regional feature on the Assam proper, distinguishable from the rest of its neighbours.

In 1826 Assam and the north-eastern areas of India were, for the first time, engulfed by an alien rule. The British rule unified the diverse entities of this region into a unitary system and introduced meaningful and far-reaching changes in the political, economic and administrative structure of the area. The process of unification and change started with the western parts of Assam as the area was amenable to the new system and proceeded gradually to other parts of Assam as well as the adjoining hill areas. The epithet "Assam" in the hand of the British imperialist acquired a new connotation. The polity of Assam was turned into a composite entity of disparate regions. The combination was made much more heterogeneous and complicated than before. In the territorial sphere it was the union of the plains and the Hills and in the field of population it was a unique combination of the Hindus, the Muhammadans, the Khasis, the Garos, the Naqas, the Lushais or Misos and other ethnic groups possessing separate religion, language and customary laws. In its diversity it became an epitome of the
British Indian empire. One could meet all the diversities like physical, human and material that India as a whole possessed in the North-East.

The British created Assam into a separate province in 1874 by adding to the traditional lands of Assam new territories disregarding their historical, ethnic, linguistic and economic affinities. Thus the Garo Hills, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the North Cachar Hills, the Naga Hills and the Lushai or Mizo Hills were included as the Hills districts. The administration of the North-eastern mountain ranges inhabited by the Akas, the Daflas (Nishis), the Miris (Mishings), the Abors (Adis), the Mishmis, the Khamptis and the Singphos were also tagged to Assam. The territories of the kingdom of Cachar in the valley of the Barak-Surma were also incorporated in course of time. Moreover, two Bengal territories, namely, Goalpara of the Brahmaputra Valley and Sylhet of the Surma Valley were also added to Assam.

The territories of the British Assam belonged to different regions and their history, population, culture, economy and development differed from one another. The Brahmaputra Valley comprising the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur belonged to Assam proper and these districts constituted the Assamese speaking region. It was also an overwhelmingly Hindu majority area. The district of Goalpara of the same valley, on the other hand, belonged to
a region where Assamese and Bengali languages and cultures overlapped. According to an early estimate majority of the people of this district had been Bengali speaking. The Muhammadans constituted nearly one third of the population of Goalpara. The plains tribal population of Tibeto-Surman linguistic group constituted a sizable element of the population of the Assam Valley as well as Goalpara District.

The Hills districts of the province constituted a separate region. The people of this region had been at different stages of development and they spoke innumerable tongues. The hill districts as a whole possessed an insignificant population. Most of the people were animistic in their faith. The Muhammadan population was nominal in this region.

The Surma Valley, viz., the districts of Cachar and Sylhet belonged to the Bengali region on the basis of language and culture. The population of the valley had, till 1911, an edge over the population of the other segments of the province. In this valley there had been practically no Assamese speaking element. The strength of the valley raised as the Bengali speaking linguistic group rapidly increased in Assam through immigration. The Muhammadans constituted slightly more than half of the population of Sylhet and they were nearly one third of the population of the district of Cachar. The Muhammadans as a whole constituted almost one third of the population of the province. The British Assam was a unique combination of
land tenures. It contained permanently-settled, temporarily-settled, revenue free and roitward holdings and were governed by laws peculiar to them.

The provincial structure experienced several vicissitudes of political and administrative reorganisations in the hands of the colonial masters. Before 1874 it was administered as a part and parcel of Bengal and made to suffer the strains of distant administration. It was then constituted into a separate province to be administered by a Chief Commissioner as the delegate of the Governor General. The Chief Commissioner's rule provided a local Government but not a provincial Government. From 1874 to 1905 the people of Assam as a whole were denied the privilege of representation in the legislative bodies of the province. Its separate political status suffered a special set-back between 1905 to 1912. During the period the Hindu dominated Assam Valley was tagged with the politically devised Muslim dominated province of Eastern Bengal. It was in this alien environment that the Assamese people got the opportunity of sending their representatives to the legislative council. In the context of the changed political position the first Assam representative found it necessary to demand protection as a minority for the Assamese people. In 1912 the alien partnership, however, ended and a considerable relief came to the people of the Assam Valley. Assam regained the status of a separate province with a legislative council of its own. The change, although came to the satisfaction of the people of the
Assam Valley, the same lies resented by the people of the Surma Valley as well as by a section in the district of Goalpara.

The partnership of Assam with the hill areas of the north-east created tension while realising the constitutional reforms by the province in 1919. It was through strenuous efforts that the Assam Valley people acquired the constitutional reforms. The province was, thus, elevated to the status of a major province and granted a Reformed Council. The Reformed Council became a balanced partnership of the two valleys and the hill regions remained outside it except for being represented by a nominated councillor. The Hill areas were designated as the 'backward tracts', unfit and unwilling to form partnership with the two plain valleys.

In 1937 the political balance between the two valleys in the legislature tilted in favour of Assam Valley districts. The new legislature possessed a partial representation of the high-landers of the province as well as a separate representation of the plains tribal communities of the Brahmaputra Valley. The newly represented segments thus availed of the opportunity and came forward with their respective claims on the body politic of Assam. They also began to make the regional claims much more diversified.

The introduction of a parliamentary model for political administration and induction of territorial as well as communal
representatives in the legislative bodies contributed to the consolidation of the middle classes on their respective bases. It also set in motion the rivalry in the field of establishing control over the political structure. In this set-up the particular interests and demands of the regional communities came in conflict with one another and brought vivisections among themselves. The structural imbalances and uneven diffusion of the developmental facilities aggravated this division, where every one felt being deprived by the other. The conflict turned worse in Assam as the province was a conglomeration of uneven partners. In Assam the provincial issues criss-crossed the regional aspirations of its components. Thus, on socio-moral issue like opium the representatives of different parts of the province could not form a united front to fight against the harmful opium policy of the Government. Their failure on this front was, however, not for any regional conflict but for lack of unison among the members themselves. The lack of understanding among the members of the two valleys, viz., the Assam Valley and the Surma Valley was mainly due to communication bottleneck.

The polity of Assam being a haphazard conglomeration of diverse entities its regional identities consolidated in different segments and not in the province as a whole. The provincial partners practically worked as separate political bargaining units on the basis of their historical antecedents,
linguistic-cultural identities and the economic systems. The conflicts and correlations of interests among them took particular shapes while dealing with the provincial issues. The main divisions of Assam's regional politics, during the period under survey, were not between the Hindus and the Muslims, or on caste line but between the inhabitants of the Assam Valley and those of the Surma Valley. The hill regions and the district of Goalpara also played their own roles in dealing with the socio-economic, culturo-linguistic and political issues of the province.

In the field of sharing of employment under the Government different segments viewed one another as rivals. The Brahmaputra Valley viewed the Bengalees of Bengal as their immediate rivals. They found in the people of the Surma Valley, particularly of Sylhet, a source of constant worry in regard to their rightful claims. In course of time the tribal people of the plains and the Hills came forward to demand their just share and reservation of posts for them separately. On this issue the intra-valley conflicts accrued. In the Bengali dominated Surma Valley the people of the district of Cachar charged Sylhet of depriving them of their just share. Under the colonial distributive system the issue went a long way to divide the people not only on the communal lines but also on the lines of the valleys, Hill districts, the tribal people of the plains and the hills and the like. The fragmented claims over the Government posts separated the territorial entities from one...
another and made them sacrifice their oneness.

In the field of development the rift was mainly between the two valleys. Separated by natural barriers the two valleys demanded simultaneous building up of developmental infrastructures in their respective valleys. However, their demands suffered as the district of Sylhet resorted to obstructionist policy and used its opposition as a tool to get separation from Assam in order to reunite with Bengal. The province as a whole was backward and needed institutional supports to fulfil its developmental aspirations. Thus the proposals for the establishment of institutions faced not only valley bickerings but also the competitive claims from different districts of the province. The Brahmaputra Valley as the mainland of the provincial entity expected to have a separate High Court in Assam to make the province self content in judicial field. But the valley failed to realise the institution as the demand faced regional conflicts of interests. The district of Sylhet was opposed to the demand for a separate High Court in Assam as it had its vested interests in the High Court of Calcutta.

The province of Assam was a cockpit of different nationalities and cultures. The cultural conflicts had been mainly between the Assamese speaking Brahmaputra Valley and the Bengali speaking Surma Valley as well as the district of Goalpara where the two cultures overlapped. The Brahmaputra Valley's demand to develop Assam into a homeland of Assamese
language and culture came in conflict with those of the Bengali
lees of the Assam Valley and the Surma Valley. The Surma Valley,
especially the district of Sylhet exposed itself as a rival to
the Assam Valley in this regard and opposed the Assam Valley's
demand to have a separate University in the province. Sylhet
opposed it on its own cultural and linguistic grounds. The role
of Goalpara in this field also created tensions for the people
of the Assam Valley. The Goalpara Zamindars carried a movement
avowedly for the protection of the linguistic cultural character
of the district. They preferred its separation from Assam and
joining with Bengal. Since the district was residing in the
cross-currents of Assamese and the Bengali cultures, and the
plains tribal were opposed to the movement, the separation
movement ultimately faded away. In this respect the leaders of
the Brahmaputra Valley, the Assam literary organisations and
the Assam Sahitya Sabha played a decisive role with the aim of
assimilating the district into the Assamese fold. In the
linguistic-cultural conflicts the tribal population of the
hills and the plains sided with the people of the Assam Valley
and preferred to be known by that identity. They, however,
demanded their proper representation in the management of the
culturo-linguistic institutions like the University. The Surma
Valley, the settled Bengali population of the Assam Valley and
the East Bengal immigrants created linguistic-cultural tensions
time and again, for which the people of the Assam Valley
including those of the hills and the plains had to feel ill at
ease. This tension, however, contributed to the consolidation of the regional identities amongst the different segments of the Assam Valley centering round the greater Assamese culture.

The land system also created structural divisions in the province. The province was divided into temporarily-settled areas, permanently-settled areas, revenue free estates and settlement free hill lands. The land-owning middle classes were, thus divided among themselves and failed to appreciate the feelings of one another. While the land owners of the Brahmaputra Valley were concerned with the periodic land settlement policy of the Government and the enhancement of land revenue, the permanently settlement-holder proprietors of the districts of Sylhet and Goalpara remained busy with the preservation of their rights of permanent-settlement. The permanently settled districts of Goalpara and Sylhet being separated from each other could not feel safe in the predominantly temporarily settled province of Assam. To make their interests safe the landlords of these district on one pretext or another raised the issue of their separation from Assam. They also led movement for that purpose under the linguistic-cultural banner. The Hill areas were, however, free from this tension, but they demanded preservation of their traditional rights over land as well as ways of life.

The political union of these diverse territorial entities was far from being smooth. The district of Sylhet
since its political union with Assam continued to demand separation. To the Assam Valley districts the separation of Sylhet was desirable. The union with the advanced district of Sylhet was viewed by the representatives of the Brahmaputra Valley as detrimental to their interests, especially in matters of exercising political control. Moreover, it was regarded as a stumbling block on their way to building up of an autonomous homeland for the Assamese people. The political union between the comparatively advanced plains and the backward Hills also stood on the way of the political advancement of the plains. Thus for embracing the constitutional reforms like the full responsible form of Government the plains regions did not hesitate to suggest the separation of the hills from the plains. The financial position of the hills and the nature of administration also showed the signs of difference between the two entities. The Brahmaputra Valley leaders, however, regarded the hills as precious parts of the province and found the hill people amenable to assimilation into the Assamese fold. The separation movement in the districts of Cachar and Goalpara were also more regional and tactical than political in nature. Their regional movements, however, contributed to hold the process of dismemberment of Assam during the British period. The separatist movements of Cachar and Goalpara exhibited that regional considerations once conceded to in Assam would not stop with Sylhet alone.
The irreconcilability of the clashes of interests between the two advanced portions of the province, viz., the Assam Valley districts and the district of Sylhet, ultimately paved the way for the latter's separation from Assam. The separation of Sylhet removed its alleged domination over the political structure of Assam. The separation was a victory for the politico-regional forces. The first dismemberment of Assam was not the outcome of racial, cultural or linguistic antipathy but the culmination of the political, regional and cultural claims that Sylhet was accused of carrying since 1874 to the detriment of the interests of the other political partners. The effect of this dismemberment on the subsequent politico-regional developments of the North East remained to be examined objectively.