Assam, the cynosure of north-eastern India, has survived a number of dissections since India's Independence. These dissections became necessary in order to meet the claims and counter-claims of different regional entities. The first was in 1947 when Sylhet went out to Pakistan. Since then new claims for dismemberment within the framework of the Constitution of India continued to appear and be met. Consequently the North East has acquired its present pictorial existence as "the land of the seven sisters". But this description of "the land of the seven sisters", however, does not reflect the actual number of sisters in India's north-east. The land still remains marked by significant differences among its inhabitants with regard to their respective stages of development and developmental perceptions, leading to the growth of distinctly different identities. The different people belonging to different ethnic groups, language, and religion have indeed contributed to the specialities as well as the richness of life and features of the land. The natural vegetation, climatic conditions, topography, historical antecedents and cultural and linguistic traditions have played important roles in shaping the distinct identities of the people living in this part of India.

The different ethnic entities of north-eastern India have passed through a chequered process of political evolution.
In the ancient and early medieval period the collective political identity of the region was reflected in the nomenclature of Pragjyotisa and Kamrupa. During the High and Late Medieval period the Ahoms came to this part of India and gave the land the epithet "Assam". Assam of the Ahom age represented a distinct regional system working over the valley of the Brahmaputra. The subsequent change in the connotation of "Assam" came during the British period. Assam under the British rule meant an Indian province of disparate territories. During this period the different ethnic communities of the North East for the first time had to suffer the strains of the joint family life managed by a colonial master. The uneven diffusion of the developmental facilities and the persisting imbalances among the different components of the province resulted in the growth of regional consciousness based on racial, cultural and religious features as well as on language, customs and property systems. For a proper understanding of the political development of the North East it becomes relevant to enquire into the working patterns of these communities in the past, especially during the British period.

In the present study efforts have been made to trace the development of the regional identities in the North East with special reference to Assam during the period from 1921 to 1947. For appreciating the regional divisions, broad historical and culturo-linguistic areas of the British Assam, namely, the Brahmaputra Valley, the hill regions, the district of
Goalpara and the Surma Valley have been taken into consideration. The identities have been traced on the basis of conflicts and co-relations that were revealed in the proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council and the Assam Legislative Assembly of the period. The debates in the legislature reflected the efforts made by the representatives of different regional segments of the polity for securing their particular regional interests. The proceedings also exposed the regional differences in the approach to the provincial issues as well as the regional perceptions on developmental priorities. The period under survey remained significant from the point of view of the Government and politics of the British Indian provinces. It began with the period when the Indian provinces were organised under the federal structure based on the principle of provincial autonomy. During this period separate sources of revenue were also allocated to the provinces to make them units of provincial Government. Assam acquired the status of a major province during the period and experienced the virtues and vices of the political developments of the era.

The present study is divided into eight chapters. In Chapter 1 efforts have been made to deal with the historical background of the different regional systems of the North East in general and Assam in particular. The chapter being introductory in nature the endeavour here has been to explain the nature and impact of different administrative systems, particularly those of Pragjyotisa, Kamrupa, the Ahom kingdom
and that of British over the body politic of the area.

In Chapter 2 the study has been made on the geopolitical features of the Brahmaputra Valley or the Assam proper, the Hill regions, the district of Goalpara and the Surma Valley. While dealing with these features of the Surma Valley region, the districts of Cachar and Sylhet have been considered separately so that their inner differences can be appreciated. The aim of the chapter is to comprehend the political, economic, linguistic and cultural orientations of the component parts and their ethos which lent a distinct characteristic to their approaches to the various issues and problems.

Chapter 3 deals with the issues pertaining to the Brahmaputra Valley, the responses of the Government to the issues raised as well as the nature of the efforts of its representatives towards their solution. To appreciate the valley's stake the issues have been examined in their historical perspectives.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the hill regions. The hill regions of Assam assumed a distinct political and administrative position under the Government of Assam. Although these areas enjoyed limited representation in the Assam Legislative Council and in the Assam Legislative Assembly they and their legislators did hold a distinct political position. In this chapter, thus, an attempt has been made to study the position
of the hill districts vis-a-vis the Government and politics of the British Assam and also the moves these regions made to retain their identities.

Chapter 5 deals with the district of Goalpara. Geographically the territory belonged to the valley of the Brahmaputra while historically it was linked with both Bengal and Assam. Its language and the land system carried elements of both these provinces. In this chapter Goalpara's moves towards preservation of its special position and interests, the nature of conflicts and contradictions have been examined.

Chapter 6 is the study of the Surma Valley region. This chapter is divided into two sections - one dealing with the district of Cachar and the other with the district of Sylhet. The Surma Valley, particularly, the district of Sylhet maintained an irreconcilable political existence in the British province of Assam. The two districts, though they shared the identity of a single valley, had inherent contradictions. The chapter deals with the issues of the Surma Valley and analyses them in the historical perspectives of the component districts. Efforts have been made to highlight the regional orientations of the valley and their approaches to the general issues of Assam. The inter and intra-valley conflicts also have been examined.

Chapter 7 deals with the issue of large-scale immigration, particularly, that of the Muslim cultivators of Eastern
Bengal and the resultant tension and the impact on the regional identity of Assam. The large-scale immigration of the landless cultivators from the Bengal district of Mymensingh to Assam was one of the controversial phenomena of the British period. The religious and the linguistic character and the behaviour pattern of the East Bengal immigrants created socio-linguistic and political tensions along with other problems. The Lire System, which was devised to deal with the settlement of these newcomers to the province, was viewed upon differently by different segments of the population of Assam and this issue brought into prominence a peculiar type of politics. The purpose of this chapter is to study the tensions generated by the immigrants and also the process of their assimilation into Assam.

In chapter 8 efforts have been made to state in general terms the findings of the study. The chapter reveals the factors on which the regional splinters of north-eastern India rest.

The study is mainly based on the proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council and the Assam Legislative Assembly of the period. The Legislative debates and the interpellations, thus, formed the important source materials for the present study. The importance of the proceedings of the legislature lies in the fact that the views of the peoples' representatives and their diverse approaches have been officially recorded in them. Other primary and secondary sources also have been
extensively consulted to trace the stages of development. The study is being carried on historical and analytical lines. The source materials are consulted in the Record Office, Government of Assam, Dispur; the Record Office, Government of Meghalaya (which is in the process of systematisation), Shillong; Assam Legislative Assembly Library, Dispur; Meghalaya Legislative Assembly Library, Shillong; the Office of the Director, Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, Gauhati; the National Library, Calcutta; the Gauhati University Library, Gauhati; the North Eastern Hill University Library, Shillong; the Office of the Indian Council for Social Science Research, North Eastern Regional Centre, Shillong; the Karimganj College Library, Karimganj (Assam).

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