CHAPTER VIII
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As in other parts of India, so also in Surma-Barak valley, political awareness was an outcome of the British rule. The forces generated and the situation created by the imperial rule provided the basic pre-requisites for the growth and development of political consciousness in the first phase and political movement as its subsequent corollary.

The first political reaction of the people of the valley was inaugurated with the regional protest against the merger of Sylhet and Cachar with the newly formed province of Assam in 1874. We have shown in the course of our discussion that the question of merger formed the most important component of the initial political activities of the advanced section of the people of the valley. At the same time, it is noteworthy that since the inception of the Indian National Congress, the leaders of the valley maintained close association with this national organization and the leaders had shown their farsightedness to tag the issue with the mainstream of national politics. When the movement against the partition of Bengal started in 1905, the valley leaders discovered in it a meeting point between the regional aspiration and national issues. The people took it as challenge to their spirit of nationalism and during this period the
urban and the semi-urban middle class came under the direct influence of nationalism. In the rural areas, the incipient Hindu middle-class came within the orbit of this new kind of nationalism and it was for the first time that the region showed a new kind of awareness to a problem that was not directly linked up with their socio-economic aspirations at the local level. So, the response to the movement may be regarded as a first step towards the synthesis of local level politics with the national agenda. At the same time, we should not ignore the fact that dissident voices were there that manifested a cleavage in the social set-up.

The birth of the Indian National Congress was a remarkable event in the political history of India. Since its inception, the political consciousness began to gain a concrete ground in the country. The Surma-Barak valley also did not remain indifferent to this new awakening. Some distinguished personalities of Surma-Barak valley maintained close contact with the leaders of the Indian National Congress. In spite of their participation, the formal branch of Congress was established in later date only. The ground for the birth of Congress, as a full-fledged organization was prepared by the political Conference held under the banner of "Surma Valley Association". Thus, it is no wonder that before the formal birth of the Congress, Surma Valley Association undertook the task of the
Congress unit and all the major decisions of the Congress were ratified in the session of the Conferences. So, in early 20's when the formal branch of the Congress was established in the valley, no fresh initiative was necessary. The Congress simply incorporated within its fold the already existing political structure of the Association. But the change over it did affect the significant transformation in the political outlook of the people of the valley.

The newly born Congress organization was matured enough to respond gallantly to the call given by the Indian National Congress during non-cooperation movement. It was during this time, the leaders of the valley in recognition of the priority of the national cause, allowed their long cherished demand of the merger of Sylhet and Cachar with Bengal, a back seat and whole-heartedly plunged into the national struggle for freedom.

The non-cooperation movement was significant in the context of popular movement in the valley because it was for the first time the people belonging to different strata came out unitedly to fight for national cause. The tides of freedom struggle wiped out the barrier between the urban and the rural, the rich and the poor, the Hindus and the Muslims and a unique fraternization encompassing the people of different shades was visible during this period. The tea garden labourer, the worst victim of British capitalist exploitation
were organised and efforts were made to secure for them a better
bargaining position vis-à-vis the more powerful class in the common
anti-imperialist front. Coming from the lower strata of the society and
having no idea of subtle political issues involved in the non-
cooperation movement, this toiling masses had shown an
unprecedented boldness of character and ability of organization to
wage sustained struggle against foreign exploitation as reflected in
'Chorgola Exodus'.

There is no doubt that the non-cooperation movement
had brought a rapprochement between different segments of the
society and the two major communities in particular. But soon after
the dissipation of the enthusiasm following the calling off the
movement, the relation between the Hindus and the Muslims in the
valley, as elsewhere, was estranged. This bitterness later contributed
to the weakening of the organizational politics in the valley. There is
no denying the fact that the Muslims' response during the non-
cooperation movement was guided by their pan-Islamic sentiments
rather than their commitment to pan-Indian allegiance. Thus, it is
seen that when the non-cooperation movement failed to deliver goods,
the law of elasticity came into operation in the valley and the old
feuds between the two major religious communities could be easily
discerned in their attitude as reflected in the Assembly Politics of
20's. At the initial stage, we notice a sign of amity prevailing amongst the members of the valley with regard to re-union move. But gradually cleavages became apparent and differences of opinion came to open. A mass united stand was taken by the Muslim members who opposed the move of re-union and they received a strong support from the Hindu rural gentry of Cachar. This alliance was not formed under the influence of any common cause. For the Muslim leaders of Cachar, reunion was regarded as a measure that might jeopardise the interest of the Muslims of Brahmaputra valley. But the rural Hindu gentry of Cachar opposed the move because they had an apprehension that the urban Hindu middle class would strengthen further their position if the reunion of Sylhet and Cachar with Bengal was accomplished. Hence, the Muslims leaders were guided by their interest as a religious community and they allied themselves at the regional level on a communal line. The rural Hindu gentry of Cachar acted with a local bias and hence they represented localism. And urban middle class leadership took their stand on the principle of linguistic province which was a national level stance sponsored by Indian National Congress in 1917, but they could not persuade their compatriots in the rural areas as to the national level significance of linguistic status. The situation manifested the complexities that encompassed the natural relationship between the nationalism, regionalism and
localism. And this kind of multiple shades of the local level maneuvers deserved to be given due importance while studying the social realities of the region.

That the valley people retained enough efficacy to rise up to occasions was evident from the fact when Gandhiji again gave the call for civil disobedience movement. The principal gain during this period was the acquisition of mass basis. Though the Muslim masses' response was nominal and the working class remained indifferent, the movement found new activists and participants from amongst the rural gentry. This development was remarkable in the context of Surma-Barak valley because this group, the rural Hindus, who mostly belonged to peasantry did not come within the congress fold even in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh till the August Movement.

The most striking development during 30's was the growth of communists and the socialist groups in the valley. These two new forces had their influence on the toiling masses and the leadership emerged from amongst the middle class activists of the Congress to guide these new forces and the working class of the region entered the nationalist movement as a recognizable political force. Actually the leftist groups were so powerful in the late 30's that they virtually succeeded in capturing some key positions in the organization. But the emergence of the left forces inevitably created
a sharp division within the organization and the rightist tried hard to subdue this growing influence of the left forces. Naturally, hostility developed and infighting followed. During this period, Muslim League entered the fray to isolate the Muslim masses from the course of national movement. A divided Congress was not in a position to combat the challenge of the emergent Muslim League and ultimately this failure was proved to be fatal for the valley.

The electoral politics of 1937 and onward was adversely affected by this rift and the tussle assumed such a magnitude that the leaders lost sight of the most disruptive phenomena in the arena of practical politics of the region. As already mentioned, taking the advantage of the situation Muslim League made rapid progress and succeeded in alienating the Muslims from the subsequent political development in the valley. Though, in the election of 1937 and 1946, Congress succeeded in regaining its lost prestige, the source of success was emotional rather than organizational. As a result, the Quit India movement could not attain much desired success in the valley. The Hindu-Muslim relation intermittently deteriorated following the all India pattern. The situation was further aggravated by the Muslim League's clamouring to include Assam in Pakistan. At this critical juncture, the nationalist Muslims were confused and their dissent was drowned. Thus, whereas at the national plane, the
developments were gradually drifting towards partition on communal line, the Surma-Barak valley was unable to read symptoms correctly because of a peculiar mingling of regionalism, localism, communalism and cross current of clashing interest groups.

On the eve of the partition, the Assamese leaders and Assam government showed their unfriendly attitude which they maintained throughout the colonial period towards the Bengali-speaking people in general and this region in particular. For the Assamese, there was a dual apprehensions that the Assamese Hindus would be dominated by the Muslims and that the Assamese culture and identity would be obliterated in the pre-dominantly Bengali state. The Sylhet referendum was only a legitimization of the general Muslims aspirations and this was fostered by the Assamese aspiration of retaining their hegemony on the province of Assam. Sylhet was, therefore, destined to be sacrificed to Pakistan. It deserves to be mentioned here that Bordoloi and other Assamese leadership were held responsible for their unsympathetic attitude at the crucial moment of referendum as the Assamese had little stake in the future of Sylhet and thereby they could afford to show indifference to the fate of Sylhet during these crucial days. We must also recollect how Sylhet leaders' claim of their superior political acumen proved to be illusory. They could not organise themselves properly. So, when the
question of referendum came, Congress Committees of both the
districts were not in a position to exert their influence on the leaders,
either at the national level or at the regional level. This failure was on
all counts a total failure and the valley is yet to recover from the
accumulated loss that followed the Sylhet referendum of 1947.

Present day manifestation of the past and
the task of the future

Social processes retain a continuity, there is
neither an abrupt beginning nor a sudden collapse. Thus inevitably
in modern day Barak Valley the legacy of the past persists and exists,
 overtly or covertly. Particularly in a region where economy is more or
less stagnant and social mobility manifested proceeds at a snails'
pace, old legacies die hard. Here we will try to locate within the body-
polity of Barak Valley some identifiable legacies of the past, both
positive and negative:

1) Group formations are there and more or less they still manifests
primordial loyalties. Thus, even more than fifty years after
independence, interest groups are yet to be formed in the valley,
though such formations are the primary pre-requisites for a civil
society. The group loyalties are not variable at the surface level in ordinary walks of life but during elections, particularly at the panchayat levels, it works almost as a routine and depending on caste-identity or social background, the loyalties of this kind can be discerned at Assembly or parliamentary election as well.

2) Communalism still play a vital role in elections. Parliamentary and State Assembly polls are mostly decided by communal voting pattern. Such votings do not abide by any ideological or political consideration. The fact is that the communal divide between the Hindus and Muslims has not only received a new lease of life in the post independent decades, but it has been consolidated further to dictate the terms of the politics of the valley.

3) The regional conflict between the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley is still a dominant political issue in the Valley. The issue is constantly hammered by the media and socio-cultural organisation and rarely a politician dares to undermine the issue in their public utternces. As in the pre-independence days, the issue comes handy in projecting and pressing demands of regional nature.

4) Localism, as in the earlier days, at present too, plays an important part. It influences electoral politics as well as intra-party and inter party inner conflict.

5) The most redeeming feature of the otherwise gloomy situation is
that the Barak Valley has been carrying the flag of nationalism she had received through the freedom movement uninterrupted and without any blemish. The Bengali-speaking Barak Valley can take pride for the fact that whereas all other regions and most of the ethnic and linguistic groups, major and minor alike, have been nurturing one or more secessionist armed groups, she has never been allured by such easy but heinous trick for increasing her bargaining power. In spite of all narrowness of lower level politics, high ideal of nationalism based on a pan-Indian commitment has always been the mainstay of Barak Valley. The Valley can rightfully boast of this legacy inherited from the freedom movement.

The political developments of a region as well as the specific course through which the political process would proceed depends on two factors: the objective situation and subjective human endeavour. Both are equally important. When an objective situation develops within a society for a progressive political action, it may not materialise or may take a retrogressive direction. Again, there may be a conscious group of people capable of providing leadership but if people are not advanced enough to respond to the preachings of the leadership, then any political action may be proved pre-mature and counter-productive.

During the freedom struggle there had always
been a gap between the frontline political activists and the masses at the grass-root level and hence the freedom struggle could not turn into an upsurge as was the case with almost all major movements. This gap still continues and the primary task for any major group of political activists to find out mechanism and strategy to bridge this gap if they desire to launch any socio-political movement for creation of a new situation where primordial social formations would take a backseat and issues would be examined on their merit for delivering public good as expected in a civil society. The task is not easy but a social movement for development cannot be initiated or conducted by any shortcut means.