CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The political awareness in Surma-Barak valley comprising the erstwhile districts of Sylhet and Cachar, like in other parts of the country, was an outcome of the British rule. The forces generated and the situation created by the imperial rule provided the necessary pre-requisites for the growth of political consciousness in the first phase and political movement as its subsequent corollary.

Although the twin districts of Sylhet and Cachar differed in their political history during the late medieval period, with regard to history, culture, tradition and heritage, they formed a single unit. This Commonness is a basic pre-requisite for the development of the political regionalism and in case of Sylhet and Cachar, regionalism had its material basis when these twin districts were incorporated into the province of Assam in 1874. Thus, it can be said that politics in the modern sense, had a regional content in its origin in this valley, and throughout the colonial period, this regional consciousness had always been a steady factor to influence the emergence of political agenda in the valley.

The political awareness in Surma-Barak valley had been following a track which was more or less in conformity with the general characteristics visible at the national level. Though the ground for nationalism in the valley was prepared by regional linguistic
consciousness, at no stage of its development, it subsided the national cause and gave priority to its regional demand. Thus, when the organised mass movement against the partition of Bengal started in 1905, the valley's leaders discovered in it a meeting point between the regional demand and national issue. They, in recognition of the priority of the national events, sacrificed many genuine issues so that the platform for mass movement could be utilised for the causes of national significance.

Both nationalism and regionalism are, in the practical sense, theoretical constructions that had to depend on local conditions for their success or failure at the operational plane. The society of Surma-Barak valley had been under the influence of fragmentation of different varieties. These fragmentations facilitated the emergence of varieties of identities and the identity of these social segments were not fixed. They often inter-twined for expansion or distanced from one another for contraction depending upon particular objective intended to be achieved.

Though the Surma-Barak valley with her multifarious people and races presented to the social scientists and academicians a very engrossing field of study, it is regrettable that, she has not got the treatment she deserved. The present study intends to project the background that facilitated the rise of nationalism, particular kind
of regionalism and multiple varieties of localism in the valley during
the colonial period. It also aims to demarcate the different phases of
the inter-play between nationalism, regionalism and localism
identifying the positive and negative outcomes. Attempt will also be
made to locate the material basis that helped the three forces to
work in unison and also to identify the reasons where these three
forces acted at cross purposes at times. However, since the study
intends to examine the interplay and interaction between these three
forces, it is imperative to define the concepts like 'nationalism',
'regionalism' and 'localism' at the outset.

Nationalism

Nationalism is a political creed that underlies the
cohesion of modern society and legitimises their claim to authority.
Nationalism centres the supreme loyalty of overwhelming majority of
the people to the nation-state, either existing or desired. The nation-
state is regarded not only as the ideal, natural or normal form of
political organisation but also as the indispensable framework for all
social, cultural and economic activities.

Nationalism has different connotations - one to the
free people and other to the subject people. Nationalism of the free
people appeared in the modern world after the decline and fall of the
papacy. That is, the western nationalism signified the emergence of
nation-states in Europe after the termination of the medieval period that established their colonial holds over the backward countries of the globe for the economic exploitations and political subjugations of the poor and backward people of the world. The nationalism of the subject people emerges as a reaction against the system of exploitation, imperialism and colonialism. Thus, we find that the meaning and nature of nationalism have varied from colonialism to anti-colonialism. The case of Indian nationalism belongs initially to the category of anti-colonial nationalism. It signifies a common political consciousness which the people of dependent country share among themselves for the purpose of winning self-rule. It represents the consciousness of a society at an advanced stage of material development. It also implies an integrated political system on the country-wise basis. V.P.S. Raghubanshi in his book Indian Nationalist Movement and Thought argued that, the study of Nationalism in India shows that we 'acquired this consciousness with the growth of her society on modern lines and with the unity of her political and economic life achieved as an indirect consequence of foreign rule in the nineteenth century. Resentment against colonial rule sharpened

consciousness and gave birth to nationalist agitation.'

There are various factors that have contributed to the rise of nationalism in India. Nationalism in India inherited its anti-imperialist character from the revolts and rebellions of the pre-1857 and post-1857 periods and the growth of the national movement provided it, in certain respects, with its anti-feudal character. Conscious nationalism flowed from a confluence of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal movement. The material basis of Indian nationalism was laid by the British colonial rule. Lala Lajpat Rai said, "the methods of the English Government in India, their educational system, their press, their laws, their Courts, their railways, their telegraphs, their post-offices, their steamers had much to do with it as the native love of country." Though several factors played their part in the rise and growth of Indian nationalism, this fact should be borne in mind that it was all a product of the very imperial system. Its genesis should be traced in the interaction of the reactionary as well as regenerating role of the very imperial system that treated India as a rich area of political subjugation and economic exploitation and thereby procreated conditions for the rise and growth

of its own enemy in the form of freedom struggle that grew more and more from a movement for gradual constitutional reforms to fight for complete independence.

By the mid-19th Century or a little earlier, two new kinds of consciousness emerged simultaneously. There was a growing consciousness among intellectuals that the Indian people had enough cultural homogeneity and geographical unity to be regarded as a single nation. This consciousness was gradually diffused. There was, also, parallelly, another consciousness that the regional-linguistic communities had more of such homogeneity and unity and hence, they also deserved to be called nations or nationalities. Alternatively, Indian Hindus and Indian Muslims were also collectively projected by some as two distinct nationalities sharing a common homeland and political destiny. Within the framework of moderate politics, however, it was the theory of pan Indian nation-hood that struck roots, as against the imperialist assertion that India's plural society lacked any kind of national consciousness. To a historian of Indian nationalism, the task is to narrate how various elements - both events and ideas - are structured into the national process. Though the transition from medieval to modern times was neither solely autonomous nor complete, there was indeed a degree of progress within the given colonial constraints. The process started feebly in
the colonial part of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in the late 18th century. It gradually spread out to the rest of the country. Modern Indian history may, therefore, be thematically defined as one related to the period of the country's colonisation, in the age of industrial capitalism, and of the development of the forces, for building the Indian nation, in response to it.⁴

Since the mid-19th century, India had been drawn into the world capitalist market in a big way despite the fact that the economy still continued to remain largely feudal in the country side and their remained other vestiges of the pre-colonial past like domination of Varna-Jati tradition. The foreign capitalist class in power saw to it that the market of sub-continental expanse that had emerged here under the Mughals was further consolidated, expanded and qualitatively transformed. It was subordinated to British monopoly capital, through a network of modern communication, transport and centralised administration. Nationalism in India was both a challenge and a response to this semi-capitalist colonial situation, and the anti-feudal, anti-caste and anti-imperialist struggles were various facets of the over-all national movement.⁵

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⁵ Ibid, P.70.
The intellectual background of Indian nationalism was provided by western knowledge and education. Study of European history and literature made the educated Indians familiar with the prevailing spirit of democracy, nationalism and liberalism in Europe. Towards the end of 18th century, the ideas of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume and others began to reach the Indian shores. This made a profound impression to the inquisitive and responsive middle-class mind. The western impact was first felt in Bengal. "Bengal was moved far more powerfully than the other Indian provinces by the new ideas of freedom and equality of the 18th century European illumination, which the British brought with them." Moreover, it was Bengal where the British rule was first established and English education was first introduced. So, it was only natural that Bengal was the vanguard in the growth of political consciousness and agitations in India in the nineteenth century.

Aspirations develop in direct proportion to achievement. The advanced and educated middle-class developed the aspirations to achieve the same objectives as the white colonists. They were determined to destroy the barrier - and carried the less

educated with them, in pursuance of their own class interests. Initially they did not oppose the colonialism. They merely wanted to pursue an upward movement within the colonial framework. When they faced exploitation, it snowballed into nationalism. Exploitation, thus, supplied the raison d'etre for the emergence of Indian nationalism.7

Thus, a new awakening marked the closing years of the nineteenth century and the advent of the next. The case of the Surma-Barak valley was no different. Certain acts emanating from the British administration objectively contributed to the growth of new response to the emerging realities of the modern world. The development of press together with the rising educated class clamouring for recognition of the legitimate status of regions distinctive socio-cultural identity created a fermentation of ideas leading to the growth of cultural nationalism. The nineteenth century, thus, marked the beginning of a national awareness that paved the way for movements, organised political associations or cultural associations with political overtones to take shape in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Needless to mention, the Swadeshi Movement that

swayed Bengal following the partition of Bengal in 1905, directly helped consolidation of nationalistic aspirations in the Surma-Barak Valley.

Regionalism

One major concern of modern political theory has been the study of the processes of nation building as a part of the general process of political development. In most of the studies, the problem of regionalism is recognised as a part of the integration-crisis or identity-crisis which differs from one society to another depending upon their historical antecedents and goal to be pursued.

The term 'region' lends itself to a multiplicity of meanings, the only common thread which runs through them is a basic cultural assumption that it is relatively smaller in size than the area in the context of which it is used. It may mean a part of a state or states look like a zone or a large tract of land specially distinguished by special features like climatic effect, cultural makeup, linguistic pattern etc. A region is marked by maximum homogeneity. It draws sustenance from language, dialects, social composition, ethnicity, cultural pattern, demographic compostion, historical antecedents, psycological make-up or recognised consciousness of group identity. The essential point is that a region is characterised more than
anything else by widely shared sentiments of togetherness, internalised from a wide variety of sources which might have included common prosperity and development, participation in a struggle, etc. and what is more, a separateness from others. In short, the facts of diversity and 'disparity' feed and sustain regionalism.®

Regionalism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It is at once psychological, geo-cultural and politico-economic in its nature and manifestation with negative and positive overtones. On the positive side, regionalism means the urge of the people living in a particular territory for self-identity and self-fulfilment and on the negative side, it represents a sense of real or perceived deprivation on the part of the people of an area. Looking at this phenomenon from a different angle, regionalism can be defined as a manifestation of those residual elements which do not find expression in the central polity and central culture. And being excluded from the centrality of the polity, regionalism get expressed in political discontent.®

The concept of Indian nation is of recent origin. But regional identities have a much larger history and they are deeply

rooted in the consciousness of the people. Regionalism is, thus, a historical concept. The emergence of regional loyalties formed an integral part of the process of the growth of nationalism in the country. With the introduction of western liberal education, an enlightened middle-class emerged who took the initiative in the formation of regional organisations for socio-economic and cultural development of their respective provinces and heralded an era of socio-cultural reawakening.¹⁰

The English education, growth of the middle-class, local press and more importantly, the genuine grievances of the people under exploitative colonial rule were the factors responsible for the growth of the regional organisations. The ground for public expression of grievances had been prepared by three major simultaneous influences on the provinces. First, the spread of British administration and its associated infra-structure; secondly, the cultural activities of the American Baptist Missionaries and thirdly, the impact of the Renaissance in Bengal. It was primarily through these agencies that modern ideas filtered into different corners of

the nation.

With the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, all were on the threshold of a great national awakening throughout India. The epoch of popular but well-regulated associations and organisations had begun. The Indian National Congress did not at any time, adopt a negative approach towards regional sentiments, but committed itself to the re-distribution of the provinces on a linguistic basis to make room for real unity as against the adenitratitve unification brought about by the exigencies and the compelling realities of alien rule. This was the approach of a genuine federal political culture for India, cultivated by an India-in-the-making at the instance of leaders whose sense of justice crossed the usual parochial frontiers of chauvinism. This meant that healthy regionalism and a recognition of the legitimate aspiration of subnationalism, with a number of major and minor nationalities, are in perfect accord with Indian nationalism, as it had emerged through the trials and tribulations of the freedom struggle. However, contradictions and conflict between the nationalism and regionalism had always been a source of tension throughout the British days and the national leadership had to keep a cautious eye to keep this tension under control.11

Regionalism, for the purpose of the present study, means the perceived sense of common interest and collective belonging that developed in the pre-independent Surma-Barak Valley as a sequel to the merger of the districts of Sylhet and Cachar with the newly formed province of Assam in 1874.

Localism

The term 'Localism' is used in this study in a special sense taking cue from the meaning given in the Cambridge dictionary, i.e., 'state of being local'. The term here signifies the manifestation of aspirations of different interest groups which had their roots at the local level and normally operated below the regional level, at times with avowed open objectives and at times with objectives beneath the surface but retained enough efficacy to influence the course of political developments. Localism is different from regionalism in the sense that whereas pan-regional aspirations were manifested in regionalism, localism represents the aspirations of different segments of the society within the region. In other words, regionalism had a pan-regional dimension, whereas 'Localism' had its origin at the local level fragmentations and it drew its strength from well-knit smaller segments of the society.

The society of Barak valley had always been under
the influence of fragmentation of different varieties. This fragmentation facilitated the emergence of varieties of identities, on the basis of imaginary or real commonness and these identities were projected and maintained for attaining mundane objectives of different kinds. The identities of these social segments were not static. They often interjoined, interlaced and intertwined for expansion or distanced from one another for contraction, depending upon the nature and need of the particular objective to be attained. However, even in this fluid situation, a pattern of fragmentation can be discerned and the broad divisions of society that had some operational role can be identified with reference to the contradiction they represented.

a) Urban Vs. rural  
b) Indigenous Vs. immigrant 
c) Hindus Vs. Muslims. 
d) Bengalee Vs. non-Bengalee.  
e) Upper caste Vs. lower caste.

It needs to be mentioned that any kind of collective identity is always developed in the context of a perceived 'other'. In Barak valley, regionalism with Bengalee overtone placed the Assamese people as this pre-requisite 'other'. On the otherhand, perceived in the context of localism this 'other' is not fixed or pre-determined. It varied according to the need of the hour and the issues
involved and also the kind of consolidation intended to be developed.

In the Barak valley, the Bengali speaking people comprises nearly 80 percent of the population, but this does not mean that "Bengali-speakers are an undifferentiated category. There is a broad division between the Bengali-Hindus and the Bengali-Muslims. Within the Bengali-Hindus, consolidation on the basis of caste or community did influence the political process during pre-independence period and is still a steady factor to be reckoned with. Amongst the Muslims, there is no caste distinction, but even before the independence, the fisherman community exerted its separate identity-socially and politically. In addition to that the tea-garden labourers who form 8 percent of the total population had a distinct socio-political existence ever since 1921. So also the case of the Manipuri's who form 2.5 percent of the total population and the Bishnupriya Manipuri with a population of about 1.5 percent. Dimasa Barmans along with small tribal groups were also important in some areas in the context of the local level politics. All these groups, sub-groups and segments had their role in the internal socio-political developments of the valley during the period to be covered by this study. Most of these factors are essentially local and they contributed significantly to the different socio-political formation that nurtured localism in the valley.
It needs to be mentioned that these definitions of nationalism, regionalism and localism are not exhaustive and comprehensive and in course of progress of the study, at some points, these definitions may be proved to be inadequate. However, we will deal with such situations when they arise. In the meantime, it is hoped that these definitions would provide us with a working framework to proceed with the study.

Review of related studies

Since the present study is a pioneering venture to look into the social dynamics that have been operating beneath the surface level of the political developments of the Surma-Barak Valley, it is not expected that much literature would be available on the specific theme we are concerned with. The fact is that the society of the valley has not yet been studied in a scientific manner and therefore, many literatures are not available.

However, there are some extant literatures which offer some insight in the history and politics of the Surma-Barak valley. These works, comprising narrative history, personal memoirs and compilation of records do not undertake the task of analysing the developments they discuss or mention, but still they are useful in the sense that we can trace out basic data and information of
diverse varieties from these works and this way they help us framing questions and at times seeking answers to the problem we are concerned with. Thus, the overview of literature in our specific context would mean the published works that would be helpful for collection of data beneficial to our purpose.

The first book on the history of Cachar was written by Upendra Chandra Guha and it was first published in 1912.\textsuperscript{12} His work incorporates valuable information as to the early social formation of the Cachar plains in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} century. It also provides us with recorded information of the immigrations of different groups dating from 1736.

The systematic effort in this regard began in mid 70's of the last century and the name of Jayanta Kumar Bhattacharjee deserves special mention. Bhattacharjee in an article titled, "Reaction of the People of Surma-Barak Valley to the Transfer of Sylhet to Assam in 1874,"\textsuperscript{13} vividly depicts how Sylhet was tactfully tagged with Assam ignoring public sentiment and how this transfer culminated to the growth of regional feeling and throughout the colonial period, this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} U.C.Guha, \textit{Cacharer Itibritta}, Sadhana Library, Dhaka, 1912.
\item \textsuperscript{13} J.B. Bhattacharjee, Reaction of the people of Surma Barak Valley to the transfer of the valley to Assam, \textit{proceedings of North-East India History Association}, 10\textsuperscript{th} Session, Shillong, 1989.
\end{itemize}
regional consciousness was a steady factor to influence the course of freedom struggle in the valley. This is no doubt a valuable document.

Another work of Bhattacharjee titled, "Cachar under British Rule in North-East India"\textsuperscript{14} depicts socio-cultural and political life of Surma-Barak Valley during British regime. This work, however, may be categorised as a typical historical work. He collected official and non-official informations from Government institutions and in this respect it is more or less comprehensive.

Besides, there are two important compilations of official records in the form of "Cachar District Records" edited by Debabrata Dutta\textsuperscript{15} and "Mutiny Period of Cachar" by Sujit Chowdhury.\textsuperscript{16} Dutta's compilation contains correspondences made by Superintendent of Cachar to the higher authorities and to the colleagues in the neighbouring areas between 1836 and 1839. These letters are helpful in visualising the overall situation of the district of Cachar during early British days.

The "Mutiny Period of Cachar," though incorporates letters concerning the Mutiny despatched by the Superintendent to

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the higher authority, some other data, particularly with regard to the growth of tea gardens, the attitude of Manipuri immigrants and interaction of the tribals with the people of the plains are also available in this document.

Nirod Kumar Gupta's work\textsuperscript{17} is a valuable document to follow the political developments of pre-independent Surma-Barak valley. It provides useful information as to the general situation of the valley during the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil-Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement. Background of Sylhet referendum is also dealt with in this work. This work helps us in getting a clear picture of the region's interaction with freedom movement under the leadership of Indian National Congress. However, the account is completely subjective and no effort was made to analyse the reason behind different variations of public attitude during different phases of freedom struggle.

Chanchal Sharma's book\textsuperscript{18} is also a memoir written by a political activist who, though was actively involved in organisational activities of congress, actually started his carrier as a revolutionary activist and ended as a Communist. So, his account

\begin{itemize}
  \item N.K.Gupta., Swadhinata Sangramer Smriti. Cachar Press, Silchar, 1974
  \item Chanchal Sharma, Surma Upatyaker Sromik Krishok Andoloner Itihas (Bengali), Oriental Library, Calcutta, 1990
\end{itemize}
gives us a different version of the freedom struggle than that of Gupta's. He faithfully narrates the beginning of revolutionary politics of the valley and ultimately how all those revolutionaries became communist. However, unlike an analyst, he stressed more on the surface level of political developments and did not try to discern the causal relation that influenced the course of political development in the valley.

Sujit Choudhury's book¹⁹ "Folklore and History" is a work of different genre. It gives us some useful insights into the functional aspects of the socio-religious life of different castes and sects of Bengali-Hindus of the Barak Valley. Choudhury in his "Barak Upatyakar Bangalee Samaj : Astityer Sankat"²⁰ identifies different varieties of divisions and Sub-divisions of the Bengali's and how these divisions always contribute to the creations of social cleavages hindering the processes of social cohesion and minimise the efficacy of any united social action. This article, though helpful for examining the problem, suffers from two limitations. Firstly, it did not give us any detail as to the historical process through which this divisions

developed and secondly, the approach to the problem is subjective. It was written from an activist point of view, and hence, lacks the objectivity of an analyst.

From the above, it becomes apparent that no study has so far been made to identify the sociological forces affecting the political development of Barak Valley. So, we had to follow an untrodden path and we had to start from the scratch. The situation had advantages balanced by disadvantages of equal magnitude. That makes the work worthtaking and meaningful.

Objective of the study

The present study aims to:

(i) project the background that facilitates the rise of nationalism, particular kind of regionalism and multiple varities of localism in the valley during the colonial period;

(ii) demarcate the different phases of the inter-play between nationalism, regionalism and localism identifying the positive and negative outcome; and

(iii) to locate the material basis that helped the forces of nationalism, regionalism and localism to work in unison and also to identify the factors that made these three forces to act at cross-purposes at times.
Hypothesis

The study is conducted with the hypothesis that the politics of Surma-Barak valley in the colonial period (1874 - 1947) was the politics of contradictions and conciliation between the forces of nationalism, regionalism and localism.

Methodology and Data Collection

The required information was obtained from books, memoranda, pamphlets and other archival records both official and non-official. The method of historical analysis was employed to seek answer to the question raised and to test the hypothesis proposed. Besides, some persons having knowledge of the subject were also interviewed.

Organisation of the Report

The entire work has been organised into the following eight chapters:

Chapter I : Introduction.

Chapter II : Socio-Political History of Barak valley with Special Reference to the
Advent of British Rule.

Chapter III : Encounter with Colonial Rule :
Formative Period of National,
Regional and Local Fragmented
Consciousness.

Chapter IV : Interaction with Nationalism :
From Banga-Bhanga to
Non-Cooperation Movement.

Chapter V : Experiment with Provincial
Autonomy (1922-42)

Chapter VI : Nationalist Aspiration vis-a-vis
Local Aspiration : From Civil
Disobedience Movement to Quit
India Movement.

Chapter VII : The Final Phase: A Confused
Nationalism Confronted By
Aggressive Regionalism Of
Brahmaputra Valley.

Chapter VIII : Summary and Conclusion.