CHAPTER III
ENCOUNTER WITH COLONIAL RULE: FORMATIVE PERIOD OF NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL FRAGMENTED CONSCIOUSNESS

The evolution of nationalism in our country proceeded simultaneously along two inter related tracks - one all India and other regional. One school of thought is inclined to characterise the phenomenon as one of 'Great nationalism' based on a feeling of all-India unity and the other of 'little nationalism', based on the feeling of regional-lingusitic identity. It might seem convenient to identify both the pan-Indian trend and the regional one with such a frame-work, to serve the need for analysis of the particular school of thought adhering to the philisophy of the 'Great versus Small'. But judged in the context of a national movement embracing within its fold the people of diverse ideologies, faith and belief and the dominant politico-organisational force operating at the national and various regional levels was more than a political party, such a simplistic demarcation between Great versus Small does not seem to be warranted. The emergence of regional loyalist, no doubt, formed an integral part of the growth of nationalism in the country, but at no stage, it contradicted the national aspirations. The Surma-Barak Valley, in recognition of the priority of the national cause,
allowed its regional-linguistic-cultural demand to assume a back-seat and whole heartedly participated in national programmes chalked out by the Indian National Congress.

From 1826 to 1874, Assam was a Commissioner's division under the Bengal Government. But with the consolidation of British rule in North-East, it was felt that a diverse country like Assam, occupying a geo-politically important position and possessing unexplored potential should not be left as an appendage to Bengal. Therefore, it was suggested that Assam should be made a Chief Commissioner's province with territories comprising five Assam District's, the Naga Hills, The Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Garo Hills, Goalpara of Koch-Behar division and Cachar and Sylhet of the Dacca division. Though the twin districts of Sylhet and Cachar of the British days differed as to their political history during the late medieval period, with regard to culture, heritage and tradition, they formed a single unit. This commonality of heritage prompted the people of the two districts to react sharply when the question of merger of Sylhet and Cachar with Assam came in 1874. The people of both the districts strongly opposed the transfer and treated this new administrative arrangement as the first partition of Bengal. As Neogi puts it: 'While the official world held divergent views on the question of the creation of Assams Chief Commissionership and the redistribution of districts
and divisions. The public opinion of the areas affected was united in condemning the measure. Neither the Press nor the people of these areas acquiesced in the decision. Their reaction was quick and profound.1

Thus, as the plan of new chief commissionership was on the anvil, protests were made both by press and public against the transfer to the proposed non-regulated province. The 'Hindu Patriot' observed "The people of Sylhet, it seems, cherished almost the same feeling on the subject of the annexation of their district to Assam that the people of Allsace-Lorraine did on the absorption of their country by Germany. But that grievous wrong have been remedied through blood shed. I hope our wrong will be remedied through more peaceful means."2 On August 14, 1874, the Sylhet People's Association submitted a memorandum signed by 2130 inhabitants of Sylhet. They claimed that from ancient time Sylhet formed an integral part of lower Bengal and governed on the same principles, rules and forms without any distinction. It should not be transferred to Assam. The memorialists asserted "Bengalese and

1. Quoted by J.B.Bhattacharjee from Ajit Kumar Neogi's book Partition of Bengal in his paper "Reaction of the people of Surma Valley to transfer of the Valley to Assam", op.cit, p.448.
Assamese were two separate nations and the pride of the people of Sylhet as of belonging to the former nation will certainly be humbled to the dust with the loss of connection with the Government of Bengal; there can be nothing more degrading and mortifying than to cease their very national name, so dear to them.\(^3\) The secretary of state was inclined to accept the contention of the memorialists and found that there was nothing common with Assam except a foreign Government. Therefore, when Assam was constituted into a Chief Commissioner's Province vide Home Department Notification No. 380, dated February 6, 1874, the district of Sylhet was not included.\(^4\) The district of Cachar, however, was included as the authorities considered that the territory historically belonged to Kachari King, a ruling house of the main land of Assam. The Secretary of State, however, accorded sanction to the transfer of Sylhet only when the Government of India and Government of Bengal assured him that the people of Sylhet would not be deprived of any privileges which they were enjoying being a part of greater Bengal at the time of their merger with Assam.\(^5\)

4. Santanu Dutta, Reunion Movement (with Bengal) in Barak Valley an unpublished paper presented to a National Seminar organised by Assam University, Silchar, 1998. p.3
On August 10, 1874, another memorandum protesting against the transfer of Sylhet was submitted to the Viceroy. The memorialists raised their protest on the cultural identity and historical association that Sylhet had with Bengal. They also expressed their apprehension that in the event of transfer, the district would be put with the laws and institutions inferior to what it had been accustomed to in Bengal under permanent settlement. The Government of India turned down their prayer but assured them that there would be no change in land revenue and judicial procedure of the district. Despite all these protests, the district of Sylhet was tagged with Assam on September 12, 1874. The incorporation of Sylhet formally separated the Bengali speaking people on either side of the Meghna from one another. The sentiment of the district in the stage of its separation was aptly described by Archdale Earle, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam as: "They wish to be spurred to higher things by contact with advanced Bengalees and they lose by being sitted against backward races of Assam". The press also ventilated the public opinion in Surma Valley. The 'Hindu Patriot'

6. J. B. Bhattacharjee, Reaction of the people of Surma Valley to transfer of the valley to Assam (1874), op.cit, p. 449.
echoed the sentiment of the general Bengalese in the statement that, "Sylhet was the golden calf which was sacrificed for the new idol called the Province of Assam".

This reaction, however, was a manifestation of the level of political consciousness and an awareness of their identity and their linguistic and cultural affinity with Bengal. Though there was no substantial change in the administrative character of Surma-Barak Valley, it made the Government cautious of the alarming growth of the political awareness of the people of the region. On the transfer issue, people appealed to the government and this was the standard method of the middle class movement in the country in the 19th century. In the context of Surma-Barak Valley, the growth of public opinion at that point of time is indeed noteworthy. Sylhet passed under the British with the rest of Bengal after the battle of Palassey and by 1874 there were at least five schools in the districts but the Cachar portion of the valley was annexed in 1832 and the 1st high school was established in 1834. There was not a single college in the valley before the establishment of Murarichand College in 1892.

9. Anurupa Biswas, Prosongo : Barak Upatyakay Sisksha Bistar (Bengali), op.cit. P.34.
Despite that, the youth of the valley seemed to be at par with the rest of Bengal and this was because, irrespective of the political status, the youth in the valley even in the earlier times received education in Calcutta and by 1874 a good number of youth received modern higher education there. They organised themselves in an association, known as 'Sylhet Union' before 1874 to promote class relations amongst themselves and to secure active cooperation in the pursuit of some common objectives. Thus, it can be asserted that the Surma-Barak Valley had made its mark in organizational politics even before its transfer to Assam. No doubt, the formation of Sylhet People's Association, which in all probability was organized against the transfer, had strengthened the element of organisational politics in the region. Though the government refused to concede to their demands, the public reactions had succeeded in impelling the government to extend some guarantees regarding identity and status. The government abandoned its original plan of deregularization of Sylhet and keeping Assam outside the jurisdiction of Calcutta High Court. Bengali continued to be the medium of education and the language of the court. The schools and colleges were affiliated to the Calcutta University. As a result, the social and cultural ties could not be snapped off by the transfer.
It is indeed very difficult to point to any particular day as marking the birth of Indian nationalism in the region. However, certain common trends could be observed. J.B. Bhattacharjee in his 'Cachar under British Rule in North-East India' pointed out that resistance to the alien rule began simultaneously with its very appearance. This was confirmed by the steady opposition to the expansion of British dominion by the States of India. Indian nationalism, according to huge Tinker, 'was a combination of modern and indigenous element'.

Surma-Barak Valley was drawn into the national mainstream during the period of Raj and made distinctive contribution of her own. Though the region had no part to play, yet the rebellion of 1857 found an echo in Cachar. Three companies of the 34th native infantry, which had mutinied at Chittagong, entered Cachar with the intention to enter into Manipur. They encountered the British troops at many places and later (in Karimganj sub-division), the rebel killed Major Byong of the Sylhet Light Infantry. Ultimately, the rebels were caught and hanged. But they became martyrs to the local people.

and their gallant challenge to the British authority at that nascent stage left a deep imprint on the local people.\(^{11}\)

Reference may be made to the cataclysm that had taken place in Cachar against the British. Sambhudhan, a Dimacha, declared himself as the saviour of the local aboriginal inhabitants and challenged the authority and died in an encounter. His heroic challenge indicated the disliking of the local people towards the foreign rule and this may be considered as a mission to re-establish and revive indigenous institution.\(^{12}\)

Another remarkable incident which created a great stir in Indian legal history was the Baladhan murder case, Kamini Kumar Chanda fought the case in defence of the local people and his sincere effort ultimately helped in the acquittal of all the accused in the case. Kamini Kumar Chanda who had already established himself as a known figure in Bengal and through his close association with Maharshi Devendra Nath Tagore and other nationalist leaders, the name of the region gradually introduced to the rest of Bengal.\(^{13}\)

Though these incidents were not directly linked

---

11. J. B. Bhattacharjee, Cachar under British Rule in North-East India, \(\text{op. cit.}\) p. 224.
13. J.B.Bhattacharjee. Cachar under British Rule in North-East India. \(\text{op.cit.}\) 247.
with major issue of nationalism, they were anti-imperialist in character and gave a moral boost to the subsequent political development in the valley.

A good number of British historians and writers claimed that Indian Nationalism was the product of the modern education which the British introduced in India. They opined that the urge for modern education helped them study and imbibe the liberation doctrines propounded by western authors. Admitting the progressive role played by the introduction of modern education, it would be incorrect to conclude that Indian Nationalism was the child of this education alone. Indian Nationalism was, in fact, the outcome of the social forces which emerged within the Indian Society as a reaction to the British conquest. It was the outcome of the conflict of interest - the interest of Britain to keep India politically and economically subjugated to her and the interest of the Indian people for a free political, economic and cultural evolution of the Indian Society unhindered by the British rule.¹⁴

At this background, Indian Nationalism crystallised

---

as a national movement in the later half of the 19th century. By that time educated class flourished in the country and with the rise of industries, a national bourgeoise came into existence. Moreover, with the tremendous success of the tea plantation, few Indians tried to penetrate into plantation business. These emerging business class initially played a collaborative role under colonial constraints. Later, a section of them had overcome their collaborative role and came to enter into the orbit of the nationalist movement in the first decade of the 20th century.

The intellectual background to Indian Nationalism was laid by western knowledge and education. Study of European history and literature made the educated Indian familiar with the prevailing spirit of democracy, nationalism and liberalism in Europe. Towards the end of the 19th century, western political thinking began to pour into Indian soil. The ideas of Montesquieu, Mill, Voltaire and others began to reach the shores. Their ideas had a profound impact on the responsive Bengali middle class. Western impact was first felt in Bengal due to the fact that the British rule was first established in Bengal. So, it was quite natural that the Bengal was the vanguard in the growth of political consciousness in India in the 19th century.

On the consolidation of the British rule, the growing demand for administrative and professional skill created a social class
educated on western lines possessing English educational qualification. A knowledge of English or English education became essential for securing job under the government or for learned professions of law, medicine, teaching or journalism. This was accelerated, when Hastings, in 1874, laid down that all public offices would be opened to the Indians on the basis of the result of competitive examination for which English education would be essential. There had thus emerged a middle class in Bengal and it was Bengal which brought a radical change in every aspect of life ushering in what was called Bengal Renaissance.¹⁵

In Surma-Barak valley, the class formation process started in the later half of the 19th century and they were mainly from amongst the landed upper castes, the handful of Tea Garden owners and revenue collector and other Officials under the British rule. They constituted the middle class in the region and took the lead, as their counter part in Bengal, in the regeneration of their country-men in the valley as elsewhere in India. Middle class is an urban concept and its formation started lately in Cachar. Initially

¹⁵. Ibid.
the vacuum was filled by importing men mostly from Eastern Bengal (specially from Sylhet) where the process started much earlier due to socio-cultural contact with Bengal. This is an indication of the belated developments of education in Cachar. The first high school in Cachar was started in 1863 and the first college was established in the year 1935 and the student who passed out from this college had to go to Calcutta for higher studies. These Calcutta educated group of Bengalee youths came in touch with the idea of Bengal renaissance and established their link with the rest of India through literary and cultural activity. Since the advanced section of the Surma-Barak valley had the opportunity to develop early contact with Bengal, the region's encounter with nationalistic aspirations had a long history. By the end of the 19th century an environment capable of sustaining new ideas and programmes of social, economic and political development was created in the valley. The enlightened student community of the valley during their stay at Calcutta remained alive of the issues and problems of their native region. They realised the benefits of education for themselves and for their families and wanted their less fortunate countrymen to share these benefits. This patriotic feeling aroused them to establish a National School at Sylhet, much before the birth of Indian National Congress which crystallised their matured national feeling and advance socio-political consciousness.
Also, with the progress of education, new ideas began to pour into the valley. As mentioned earlier, Kamini Kumar Chanda was a close associate of Devendra Nath Tagore and it was Chanda who propagated the ideas of Bengal renaissance in the valley. Bipin Chandra Pal, Sundari Mohan Das, Tarakishore Chowdhury and many others were the active members of the Brahma Movement. They carried the message of modernism, nationalism, liberalism, woman education and social reforms to the remotest corner of the valley.\(^\text{16}\)

So, it can be easily said that by the end of the 19th century, an environment capable of sustaining new ideas and programmes of national character had been created in the Valley.

The birth of Indian National Congress in 1885 was an unprecedented event in the political history of India. Since its inception, national consciousness was gaining ground in the country. The ideals of Congress produced different reactions in the different parts of the country. Barak valley did not remain aloof from the mainstream of this new awakening. The valley hitherto searched for an alternative and the opportunity came with the birth of the Indian National Congress which opened the flood gates of mass participation.

\(^{16}\) Santanu Dutta, The Surma Valley Associations and Nationalist Upsurge. Arun Bhuyan (ed.), Nationalist Upsurge in Assam. op.cit. p. 124. APPENDIX A.
in the socio-political activity in the valley. Some distinguished personalities of Surma-Barak valley maintained close relation with the Indian National Congress since its birth. In 1886 session of the Congress held in Calcutta, Dinanath Dutta, Manager, Cachar Joint Stock Company participated as a delegate. Kamini Kumar Chanda yet to migrate to Cachar also attended Congress session as a representative of "Habiganj People's Association". Other two members to attend from Sylhet were Joygovinda Shome and Bipin Chandra Pal. In 1899, Ramani Mohan Das represented Sylhet as a lone delegate. In subsequent years, these leaders along with Brojendra Narayan Chowdhury, Mohendra Nath Deb and others attended almost all the sessions of the Congress. The team from Surma-Barak valley was most impressive when 34 members from the region attended the Calcutta session in 1906.\textsuperscript{17} In spite of this participation, the formal birth of the Congress as an organization took place in a later date only. The ground for the birth of the Congress in the valley was prepared by four political conferences held between 1906-1920 under the banner of the Surma Valley Political Conference.

\textsuperscript{17} Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj : Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947, \textit{op. cit.} p. 345. APPENDIX B
"Nationalism is not an abstract concept. The subjective element i.e. the consciousness of national identity, a national political movement is no less important. Obviously, subjective factors do not come out of the blue; they are the result of certain historical conditions .... persecution, operation etc."\(^{18}\)

The political awareness of the people of Surma-Barak Valley had been following a track which was more or less in conformity with the general; characteristics visible at national level. Though the ground for nationalism in Surma-Barak Valley was prepared by regional and linguistic consciousness, at no stage of its development, it gave priority to its regional demand subsiding the national cause. On the contrary, when the call for freedom struggle beckoned the entire nation, the valley kept aside its regional demand and sacrificed many genuine issues for which it had to pay heavy price at a later date. One important aspect of Assamese middle class nationalist feeling from the very beginning had been its regional character. Some social scientists termed it as 'little nationalism'. Assamese leadership had been exposed to the mainstream of Indian nationalism in terms of Assam and her problems rather than the all

18. Tilottama Mishra, Assam and Nationality Question, Proceeding of All India Seminar on Nationality Question in India, op. cit. p. 58.
India plane. The allegiance of Assamese intelligentsia to the Indian National Congress was also marked by strong regional considerations. This regional sentiment helped to consolidate the Assamese people culturally and politically throughout the colonial period and this legacy has been continuing in the post independent decades.\textsuperscript{19}

Secondly, it is beyond doubt that the British rule has brought about a revolutionary change in the socio-political outlook of the people and the introduction and spread of English education was a boon in disguise. It directly or indirectly gave a democratic direction to the Indian nationalism. In spite of the positive role played by English education, an overwhelming majority of India's populace remained illiterate and their response, particularly of the rural and indigenous people towards English education, was very feeble. In case of Cachar, the main obstacle which stood in the progress of education were not far to seek. The district was poor and had an underdeveloped agricultural economy. The common people generally were not in a position to afford the luxury of a formal education. Their feeling often reflected in utterances like. 'Let my boy attend

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, p. 54.
school if the pandits will provide me another boy to attend my cows'. Amongst the Muslims, there were some religious restriction in adopting western education. Moreover, education of woman was subjected to some kind of social taboos both amongst Hindus and Muslims. This attitude of masses towards education resulted to confine education amongst a section of people who were mostly immigrants. These people brought with them ideas which were important to the advanced section of the Indian people. But in most cases the local people at the grass root level had no idea as to the significance of the issues involved in these debates and agitattions.\(^\text{20}\)

Thirdly, the reaction towards the administrative arrangement in 1874 was not as intense in Cachar as in Sylhet. The people of Sylhet feared that after being transferred to new set up, the district would lose all the benefits - social, cultural and administrative which they hitherto enjoyed being a part of Bengal. Moreover, Calcutta was the cultural and educational headquarter for the youth of Sylhet. They were being habituated in Calcutta oriented life style and familiar with art and culture that Calcutta had been generating at that time.

\(^{20}\text{A. C. Chakroborty, History of Education in Assam, Mittal Publication, New Delhi, 1989, Pp. 74-75.}\)
This link would be snapped off by the transfer of their district and a cultural gap would emerge. However, in spite of the assurance they received from the government, they could not wholly heartedly accept such an arrangement and expressed apprehension whenever the situation so demanded. The people of Cachar, on the other hand, were comparatively less concerned with these issues except a small nucleus of local educated gentry.21

Lastly, at the local level, a different kind of response to the foreign rule can be discerned. It appears that the local population often represented by the Meerashdars and landlords utilized a different kind of mechanism for expressing their own reaction to the foreign rule. Thus, we find that the Meerashdars of the district of Cachar sent a joint memorandum against the decision of J. G. Berns, the then Superintendent of Cachar that forbade employment of Mooktars in Collectorate and Fauzdar cases.22 Again, we find that one Sona Mia Chowdhury had discovered a number of original means for defying the authority of the district administration. This became explicit in a letter written by E. R. Lyons, Superintendent

22. Debabrata Dutta, op. cit., pp. 54-55
of Cachar dated July 2, 1845. He wrote:

"Time and imprisonment appears to have no effect in checking Sona Mia Choudhrie's act of oppression. This is the sixth time I believe that the Choudhric has been imprisoned, yet the present is perhaps the gravest charge that was even preferred against him on being discharged from jail, about 4 months since, I heard that he assembled 7 elephants, 3 palkies or doolies and between four to five hundred people within a quarter of hour's walk of the jail, his objective in doing so being of course a desire to show his contempt for the punishment he had received and to remind the people of his neighbourhood that he had lost none of his power by a six month's confinement in jail. Indeed, he never on any previous occasions displayed such pomp pageant. The Choudhrie's removal from this district would be the greatest blessing that could happen to the people of Cachar".23

It appears that Sona Mia Choudhrie was an unusual uncompromising character who thought out indigenous mechanism for showing his disregard to the British administration. In the other case, Meeerashdars were not much assertive but the fact remains that they had enough courage to lodge a direct compalint

23. Ibid. p. 139.
against the district authority. Thus, local level resistance was there and those were normally manifested when local level issues were involved.

One of the objectives of this study is to examine how these two parallel reactions to the British rule, one an urban and another emerging from local level society interacted with one another throughout the course of Colonial period.