Chapter 2

Ethnonationalism in Assam: A Historical-Sociological Account

The past is the explanation of the present and the present is knowable through the genesis rooted in the past. F. Braudel contends that “past and present illuminate each other reciprocally” (Braudel 1980, 37). Within the discipline of history in recent times, diverse perspectives seem to be at work to look history from multiple points of view, whereas the traditional historiography was realized to be subverting many alternative ways of doing history. The subaltern study or history from below, social history, gender history, ethnohistory purposefully deviate from the conventional chronological recordings of kings and queens and dynasties; and look history from the people’s perspective(s). On the other hand, sociology looks at the human relations as a more complex societal affair; emphatically in present. The collaboration of both gives the scope to see the social moments and movements from various outlooks. Paul Sweezy defines sociology as an “attempt to write the present as history” (Mills 2000, 146).

The historical sociological approach that has been adopted in this chapter is to understand the synchronicity of the present events and movements, through examining the past temporalities. The task of chaining the past moments of different occasions elevates to understand present blurriness. Taking the theoretical arguments from the previous chapter, once we historicize the present political situations of Assam, it gives the scope to theorize the context. Here in this chapter, thus, bringing the historical moments, it is attempted to understand the ethnonational questions in present context.

The present-day Assam is the outcome of the colonial cartography of late 18th and early 19th century. Prior to that, this region was ruled by numbers of dynasties in medieval period. The medieval Ahom dynasty in Assam could
bring all the small territories under the same administrative purview, especially of the Brahmaputra valley. But a concrete shape of Assam came through colonial cartography which was again reframed in due course. If we examine the societal formation, mode of production and the colonial heritage as well as the conditions created by colonialism, it can provide us a reasonable understanding of the historical inevitabilities responsible for the present ethno-national turmoil which is characterized by a series of new-social movements.

In this chapter, it is attempted to construct a historical account of the societal development in Assam, starting with the migration and settlement of different communities and further development in the medieval, colonial and post-colonial situations. The effort is to see the formation of Assamese nationality through the inclusion of different groups and subsequent exclusionary politics that later bought the ethnic questions into the fore. Emphasizing on the 19th century Assam and the colonial processes during that time, this work examines the issue of modernity and identity question – especially how the colonial rule provided the scope for articulating the notion of nation and identity, which consequently became too sharp for an exclusive identity politics.

2.1 Migration History in Assam

It has been established, as evident in various literatures, the earliest settlers in the present-day territory of Assam were the Bodo stock of peoples. The present demographic composition bears testimony to the fact that Assam and its surrounding states were the destinations of several communities, in different points of time in the past. These communities, who are frequently clubbed together under the label of Indo-Mongoloids and who had made Assam their homeland in their respective territories, are distinct by virtue of

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1 New Social Movement: In the late 1960's and 1970's a new paradigm in the social movement began. As a part of the structural condition of the post-industrial society, these movements "are not primarily constructed around social class or concerned with economic redistribution" (Bruce and Yearley 2006, 213); they represent new collective actions, new goals on issues like gender, identity, sexuality and environment.
their traits of language, religion, customary practices and expressive cultural forms. By the beginning of the last millennium, large scale Aryan migration from central and northern India to Assam started. A major significance of this migration is that the Aryans brought along with them advance methods of agriculture, experts in administration as well as priests. The coming of Ahoms in the 13th Century AD brought further decisive changes in the administrative as well as social structure in the society in Assam. The Ahom kings brought almost all the smaller communities, ruled by their respective dynasties, of Brahmaputra valley under their rule (Sharma 2012, 287-309).

The final sets of ruling people came in the colonial period, with the coming of British. The colonial rulers exploited this region in terms of natural resources and labour. Once the British took the custody of Assam, they started inducing the colonial modernity by introducing western administrative systems and by sponsoring the migration of the Bengalis to run the administrative offices. These Bengalis became immediate enemy for the newly educated Assamese section who also competed for the Government jobs. The coming of Bengali administrative staff and the development of enmity between the locals and outsiders helped to create otherness.

The discovery of tea in Assam by the British was one of the major events in 19th century Assam. The colonial government was quite enthusiastic for large scale cultivation of tea in Assam to break the Chinese monopoly. Already by 19th century tea became a popular beverage in Europe; and was exported from China as it was the only tea producing region at that time. British didn’t have control on China and had to depend on the Chinese for tea. However, the essential requirement of trained and motivated labour force could not be made from the local population of Assam as the population in Assam was reduced significantly due to the civil wars of Muwamoria revolt\(^3\), Kala azar\(^4\) and

\(^2\)Tea was used locally as a beverage by different communities in Assam. British, however, first cultivated it for commercial purpose.

\(^3\)Muwamoria revolt: Revolt of a particular sect of Vaishnavite monks, called Muwamoria, against the ruling Ahom king during 1769-1806.
Burmese incursion. Subsequently, Assam had enough waste land but insufficient labour force for large scale cultivation of tea. Different literatures also show that a major chunk of Assamese people was addicted opium consumption and therefore reluctant to work in the tea gardens. Hence, the British had to import labour force from north and central India. The growing tea industry also compelled the Government to build the basic infrastructure e.g. transportation and communication system in Assam to export tea to England via Calcutta. Thus railroad came into existence. As the *empire's garden*, Assam began to see the faces of the new technologies of transport and communication; the travelling time between Assam and Calcutta (the mediating hub of that time) got drastically reduced from two months to two or three days. These pacified the colonial exploitation, flow of capital and also the migration of different categories of people. The export of tea was accompanied by incoming of Marwari traders, Bengalis and other labourers. The early capital formation in the region thus invited other contesting groups also. Capital is always the core of developing and defining the idea of modernity and development in traditional understanding. Capital was also

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4 *Kala-azar* or *visceral leishmaniasis* (black water fever) was an epidemic which broke out in Assam during the last decade of the 19th Century. The name of Assam was crafted in the medical memory as this disease was named as *the Assam Fever* (Kar 2003, 2-4).

5 All the newspapers published in 19th century opposed the common addiction of opium of the Assamese people. Hemchandra Barua, wrote a book namely *Kaniar Kirion*(1861) (*Opium Eaters’ Gossip*) through which he criticized the prevalent practice of opium consumption of the people of Assam irrespective of caste and class.

6 Jayeeta Sharma has conceptualized the colonial Assam as “Empire’s Garden” through large scale tea plantation and production by the British in her book *Empire’s Garden Assam and the Making of India* (2012).

7 Tea and other resources were first exported to Calcutta and from Calcutta it was sent to foreign countries. Capital also came through the similar path.

8 In plantation economy of Assam, along with many foreign planters, some local planters also emerged. Jagannath Baruah, Maniram Dewan etc. were the early tea planters in Assam.
responsible for the emergence of distinct categories of peoples, new work-schedules and lifestyles which were illustrated by the vocabularies like labour, labour time, leisure, bureaucracy, holiday, etc. Another important development due to colonialism in Assam was the implementation of monetized economy which helped in early capital exchange via exploitation of resources like tea and later coal and petroleum. It further developed other spheres of societal affairs, specially, institutionalized education and interactive public spheres which played crucial role in the formation of new political consciousness.

2.2 Social Formation in Assam:

The history of social formation in Assam is a history of the series of inter-community and intercultural processes amongst the earliest settlers in Assam in one hand, and the subsequent batches of relatively later entrants on the other. Such processes of interactions, which are still on-going, have been far from being symmetrical. Most often it’s a story of confrontation, in varied intensities, of the indigenous population with the unstoppable influence of the later migrants of Aryan and western origin. Theoretical perspectives of social changes, like universalization, parochialization and sanskritization,9 have been found useful in understanding and interpreting the processes of social formation in this region. Some of the salient facts and features pertaining to these processes are discussed in this chapter.

9 Universalization and Parochialization: Elements of little tradition, indigenous customs, deities, and rites of passage circulate upward; the process is called universalization. Likewise, some elements of the great tradition also circulate downward to become organic part of the little tradition, and lose much of their original form in the process is 'Parochialization. These twin processes, which are complimentary to each other, were theorized by McKim Marriot for understanding Indian civilization. (Upadhyay and Pandey 1993, 376)

Sanskritization: A process of upward mobility of the lower caste people to upper caste in the caste hierarchies in Hindu Society. The idea was theorized by sociologist M. N Srinivas.(Srinivas 1956)
2.2.1 Sanskritization and Brahminism:

The making of the region into a paradise by settlement of numerous communities in different points of time of history possesses unique kind of social formation. The Brahmins came with the Aryan waves of migration and started the process of Hinduizing the tribal people who had been practicing different forms of animism. A visible social hierarchy began to emerge where the Brahmins occupied the highest position in the caste ladder; but they remained as a non-producing class who, by virtue of their knowledge of the Sanskritic texts, earned from the other caste groups in the Hindu fold. As such, to increase this Hindu fold by attracting the tribal animist people into it, the Brahmins in Assam created many myths and stories through which tribal people were linked to the classical Hindu mythology. In this way, the twin processes universalization and parochialization started in Assam. Illustrative to the process of parochialization is the fact that many tribal people, including their kings sometimes, adopted Hinduism. Bhaskar Barman, the 6th Century king of the Barman kingdom was a Bodo King who got converted to Hinduism. Many tribal dynasties also patronized the Brahmins, who had the knowledge of classical Sanskrit texts. The Ramayana was translated from Sanskrit into Assamese by Madhav Kandali in the 13th century where he was patronized by a tribal king namely Mahamanikya10. Along with such process of parochialization, the reverse process i.e. universalization also occurred. Many myths were created which linked the origin of the tribal people to the Hindu mythology. Many tribal Gods and Goddesses converted to Hindu god and goddesses. It is believed that the tribal goddess Ka-me-kha became Kamakhya, which is considered nowadays as the icon of Hindu mythology (Guha 1993, Gohain 1989, & Sharma 2006). Creating and linking up the tribal mythology to the mainstream Hindu mythology, different tribal practices and names were also sanskritized. Noted cultural activist Bishnu Prasad Rabha

10 Mahamanikya was a Sanskritized name, his tribal name was Mahamanikpha
opined that the Bodo name of the river *Bullung-Buthur* became the Brahmaputra.

### 2.2.2 Neo-Vaishnavism in Medieval Period

Gohain (1989) holds that the seeds of the process of Assamese nationality formation are to be found in the old *Kamrupa* (a sanskritic reference to the erstwhile Assam); and the colonial regime contributed to it by putting the final layer of linguistic nationalism. The Brahmins had started the process of hinduization by converting the local and indigenous populace of the region. Evidences of the same have been found to have started from 6 Century AD and onwards. But the Brahminic model of sanskritization was not absolutely compatible to many of the local groups; and copying of the Brahminic rituals was not possible beyond certain extent. For example, the hinduized and sanskritized order demands certain restraining food habits, in addition some other practices to be adopted and abandoned. The local masses of the old Kamrupa who practiced animism, could not be entirely converted to the Hindu fold. In a common parlance, Brahminism lost its attractions among the majority of the animist masses in medieval Assam. However, the seeds of the Brahminic philosophy sown in Assam for the propagation of Hinduism during this time were later nurtured fully by the neo-Vaishnavism from 15th century onwards. In contrast to the orthodox Brahminic model of sanskritization, Sankardeva (1449-1568) and his disciples could successfully formulate a way of life which was much simpler and easier to follow for the local masses. In post-Sankaradeva times, neo-Vaishavism spread across the plains of the Brahmaputra valley with the establishment of hundreds of monasteries (called *xatra*, in Assamese) which spearheaded the processes of hinduization and sanskritization during the period of 17th century to 20th century.

The neo-Vaishavite movement opened up several dimensions for a more inclusive society through its flexible and easy-going ideology. There were number of factors for its popularity: a) Sankardeva and his disciples used
easily intelligible language in their texts to propagate neo-vashnavism, making the local masses free from cracking the classical Sanskrit texts; b) the practice of worshipping of huge number of Gods and Goddesses prevalent in traditional Hinduism was replaced with simpler monotheism by Sankardeva; c) though it didn’t challenge the rigid caste hierarchies that allow the lower caste people to climb up only through tough accomplishments after generations, neo-Vaishnavism was successful in bringing in a relatively egalitarian and inclusive social environment under it; d) the complex and authoritative rituals (often involving sacrifice of life) of the Brahminic tradition were abandoned for much simpler ritual practices. Such simplicity and ease of the neo-vashnavism was responsible for its tremendous popularity among the tribal populace who embraced Sankardeva’s faith coming away from their traditional faith. Under the neo-Vaishnavism, the tribal neophytes were given entry by accommodating them in the lowest strata of the caste hierarchies. Sometimes, new caste groups were also created to accommodate the tribal neophytes. It was made possible for the lower new caste group to attain even the highest status of the caste hierarchy by emulating the practices of the higher castes in the order – a mobility which was not possible in Brahminic model of sanskritization. Historian Amalendu Guha (1993, 10) shows the scheme of climbing caste hierarchies for the tribal people, in the vaishnavite model of sanskritization, as follows (Guha 1993, 10):

Tribal → Sarania → Saru Konch → Bor Konch → Keot → Kalita → Kayastha

In the social formation of Assam these processes of neo-vaishnavism and sanskritization had a significant role. It brought the tribal population from shifting cultivation to settled cultivation, from dry rice to wet rice cultivation, from the use of hoe to the practice of ploughing using bullocks, from burial of the dead to cremation, from non-vegetarianism and alcoholism to

11 The Kirtan Ghosa written by Sankardeva to propagate neo-vaishnavism is started with the story of Ajamil Upakhyan (The Story of Ajamil) where the protagonist, a sinner and dacoit got salvation only by chanting the name of God (Narayana) during the time of his death which he eventually was calling his son whose name was also Narayana.
vegetarianism and teetotalism. Further, a standardized language adopted in neo-Vaishnavite text, literature and performative communication, at the cost of other local dialects, became the foundation for a modern Assamese language in later times.

Through this process not only the royal dynastic groups like Ahoms and Chutias, but also the groups like the Moran and the Bodo-Kacharis embraced the Hindu fold (ibid). Though initially the ruling Ahom dynasty was not too favourable towards the vaishnavite saints and the xatras\(^{12}\), the growing popularity of the faith among the common people compelled the dynasty to patronize the xatras generously in the later periods. The neo-vashnavism thus brought radical changes in the social life of Assam that contributed to the important developments like detribalization and feudalism, and the unification of the peoples in the plains of Assam.

It is especially important to note, as Gohain has pointed out, that the patronization of the xatras by state (the kingdoms of the Ahoms in the east and the Koch in west) in the later periods facilitated for something akin to the feudal exploitation. However, Gohain opines that the neo-Vaishnavism did not provide sufficient means to the tribal people for their transition from the primitive tribal stage to an absolute feudal structure and economy (Gohain 1989).

Referring to D. D. Kosambi and R. S. Sarmar’s argument on Indian feudalism, Gohain came to the conclusion that if the Brahmins did not bring the tribal populace to the caste society as well as the tribal elements and rituals were not incorporated in Hindu traditions, the neo-Vashnavite saints would not have been much successful to propagate the vaishnavite philosophy. R. S. Sharma gives the example how Brahminism defined some acts as sin; e.g., killing of a cow is equal to killing of human. This idea stopped killing of cows. It further helped in agricultural development. For Gohain, religion or spirituality was

\(^{12}\) A xatra is a Vaishnavite monastery in Assam, which may be of celibate or non-celibate order.
not only the base of spreading Bhakti movement in Assam or that of the pan-Indian situation during the medieval period. There was also a material base for this movement. The socio-economic developments opened up the doors for spirituality. Growth of commodity production was the base of Bhakti movement (ibid, b). A new social geography was created out of the development in the material conditions (commodity production) and exchange taking the heritage and uniqueness of the place. The regional literature created the psychological make-ups. The Bhatki Movement created such literatures. Looking the social formation in the light of Marxist interpretation, Gohain states that classical feudalism in Assam could not develop fully as the sources of feudalism in the tribal lifestyle was absent. The then Ahom dynasty ran a semi-feudal style with traditional flavours. Once it failed – the caste based feudal style was adopted. But the neo-Vaishnavite philosophy was responsible for weakening the rigid caste-ridden ideology to some extent, though it never came up with any revolutionary uprooting of the caste system (ibid).

As such, a semi-feudal society began to develop simultaneously along with the commodity production and spreading (ibid). The increasing number of xatras established by the disciples of Sankardeva after his death became the centre of Assamese culture. It was not only the centre of religious activities but part of the society as a whole beyond the domain of religion. The unfinished task of Sankardeva was carried out by the xatras by continuing detribalization and socio-cultural inclusion in the later period.

2.2.3 Mode of Production (MoP) and Social Formation:

Regarding the mode of production in Assam in particular, and North-East India in general, the scholars are in a consensus that multiple modes of production existed into the region. As discussed earlier, this region was dominated by indigenous population (most of whom were later identified as tribal from colonial times onwards) where the Aryan migration initiated an
advanced stage in terms of agriculture. Significantly, the process of
detribalization had started during the 6th Century and got the peak in 16th - 18th
century. If we are to look at the economy or the mode of production, it can be
divided broadly into tribal and non-tribal; where tribal economy can further be
subdivided into plains and hills.

The economy and the mode of production to some extent were similar in
Brahmaputra, Imphal and Surma valley. As such, these valleys exhibit a
different cultural and material style in comparison to the hill-regions of the
North-East. These valleys were also largely dominated by the tribal societies.
A tribal society is best understood in relation to the mode of production and
self-sufficiency. Tribal societies generally go for dry rice and shifting
cultivation which is relatively a primitive stage of human society. The dry rice
cultivation hardly gives any scope for surplus accumulation, thus, it does not
help in contributing to the economy of the non-working rulers. Wet rice gives
more productivity and ensures surplus, offering the scope to feed the rulers.
Hence state formation is also possible in such societies of latter kind. The
advanced mode of agricultural systems and wet rice was brought by the
Ahoms in the 13th Century with sophisticated technology. It also encouraged
the peasantry to cultivate wet rice (Gogoi 2002: 37).

It thus converted the non-state spaces into the parts of the state spaces. The
mode of production debates also show the relation of wet rice cultivation and
state formation in general. James Scott in Art of Not Being Governed
mentioned that the wet rice cultivation among the communities was the
foundation of early state-making. He holds,

... wet rice cultivation provides the ultimate in state-space
crops. Although wet rice cultivation offers a lower rate of
return to labour than other subsistence techniques, its return
per unit of land is superior to almost any other Old World
crop (Scott 2010: 41)

As such, most of the tribal societies of the North-East India had been stateless
people, but having independent villages, prior to the coming of the Ahoms.
Again, the hilly tribal communities were known to be practicing shifting cultivation, popularly known as Jhum, which was again part of non-state practice. James Scott in this regard considered the hilly populace as stateless and anarchist people. However, he is looking at it in terms of a continuum of hills and plains instead of a water-tight division between dwellers of the hills and plains. Many hilly people started residing in the plain with the introduction of the wet rice cultivation. Similarly many invaders pushed the plains people to the hills. The shifting of Dimasa Kachari kingdom from plains to the hills of North Cachar, and the Khasi kingdom to the hills of Meghalaya\textsuperscript{13} are some of the illustrative examples of this fact (Chaube 1999).

The societal development of different tribal societies was not similar and uniform. For example, among all the other hill tribes of the North-East, the Khasis and the Jaintias had a moderately advanced economy. Evidences are found about the linkages of trade and commerce of the Khasis with their neighbouring areas like Assam and Bangladesh. Similarly, different Naga groups had love-and-hate relationship with the then ruling Ahom dynasty during the medieval period. Moreover, significant difference was found in case of the Imphal valley of present-day Manipur with the other two valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Surma (Mishra, 2000).

Thus, the social processes fuelled by the changing mode of production in the Ahom period, and the xatra-centric Vaishnavite setup of culture and religion, gave the scope for formation of a more homogeneous inclusive society in the medieval period, where many tribal groups identified themselves with the singular identifier - the Assamese. However, as the processes of hinduization and sanskritization were not uniform and didn’t happen in every tribal pocket, this process of the making of the Assamese whole was also not uniform in all

\textsuperscript{13} The Goddess Kamakhya was worshipped by the Khasis, which is nowadays worshiped by the Hindus. The temple is situated in Guwahati which shows that Khasis earlier resided in present day Guwahati. But the Khasis left the plains and entered in the hills. The possibility of living the plains may be they were pushed by the invaders.
places. For example, the process could not at large touch the tribal communities of the lower Assam, and most of the hill areas. In contrast, it was quite influential in the upper Assam, among the communities like the Morans and the Mataks, the Ahoms, the Mishings and even some of the Bodos in central and western Assam.

2.3 Colonial Period: Rise of Political Consciousness

The span of direct colonial rule in the India was almost 200 years, and the same in the context of the province of Assam was even less than that (121 years, to be precise). But this apparently short period had completely changed the past, the present and the future of the region. This period demarcates the subsequent history from the previous ones by the emergence of the era of modernism and nationalism, modern education system, bureaucracy and judiciary, printing press and public sphere, ideas of development and democracy. All the social phenomena and discourses, upon which the fundamental ideas of contemporary life are based, came through the colonialism.

With the acquisition of Diwani of Bengal in 1765, the East India Company came into direct contact with North-East, specially the medieval kingdoms of Manipur and Assam. These territories did not have enough economic worth or surplus revenue to attract the British. But the Burmese invasion during 1817-24 in Manipur and Assam, the East India Company had to change the policy as the security of Bengal became one of the major concerns of the Company. The ruling Ahom dynasty in Assam became weaker due to civil wars starting with the Muwamaria uprising in 1770. The invasion of the Burmese forces and subsequently their taking of control over Assam and Manipur created troubles for Cacher and Sylhet as these places were already parts of the Bengal province of British India. The ruling Ahom dynasty asked help from the East India Company. In such juncture, the British declared war against the Burmese. The wars took place during 1824-1826, between British and
Burmese and finally British won it and signed the Treaty of Yandabo\textsuperscript{14} in 1826 with the Burmese. With this treaty, the British took over the region by annexing Assam within their colonial empire (Guha 2006, 1). Once the Company took over the region, it introduced taxation, bureaucracy, modern education etc. which became the channels for colonial modernity. Bengal already had tested similar kinds of modernity and was more experienced than Assam by that time. As such, a set of new-trained personals were brought from Bengal to run the newly set up bureaucratic machinery in Assam province. They became the immediate enemy and contestants for newly emerged middle class of Assam, who also began to hunt for jobs within the colonial administration.

In the following paragraphs, a discussion has been attempted on how colonial rule fostered the Assamese identity through certain social, political and economic conditions; and also created the foundations for the articulation of ethno-national identities both during the colonial regime itself and also during post-colonial times of independent India.

Although the idea of nation and nationalism is convincingly historicized as products of the 19th century European developments, in many parts of the colonies of Asia and Africa it shows a deviation from the then western understandings. The social formations and the colonial exploitations in these regions provided the scope for emergence of a formulative ideological space – the creation of homogeneity vis-à-vis otherness. For instance, Mahmood Mamdani argues how the colonial rule in South Africa created different kinds of identities through the institution of law. In colonial Africa, races were governed by the civil laws and considered as part of the civil society, where ethnicities were governed by customary laws. Civil laws talk the language of

\textsuperscript{14} 'The treaty of Yandaboo' was signed in 1826 between the Burmese and the British; and the fate of Assam's future was decided but it. The British took over Assam and brought it under similar administration with rest of India. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an insurgent group, claims that Assam became a part of India accidently, through the treaty where no representative of Assam was present. Hence, after the departure of the British, colonialism still continues. ULFA thus is claiming a sovereign Assam.
rights, where customary laws talk the language of tradition. To maintain the
superiority of the whites over others, the distinction between races and
ethnicities was made through such legal instruments. The epiphany of such
kinds of distinction and diverse kinds of law is that one is governed by biology
where other is by culture. It in turn set the limits of power. Mamdani argues
"For civic power was to be exercised within the rule of law, and had to
observe the sanctity of the domain of rights. The language of custom, in
contrast, did not circumscribe power, for custom was enforced. The language
of custom enabled power instead of checking it by drawing boundaries around
it. In such an arrangement, no rule of law was possible" (Mamdani 2001, 653-
654).

The story in the Indian context, and especially in Assam, is not too different
from what Mamdani observes in the colonial interventions in South Africa.
The multiplicities pertaining to the matters of community identity were created
in Assam by the British colonial regime through transplantation of the
categories like primitive, backward and advanced – which were to be used as
the labels for identifying the peoples and their regions. Euro-centric episteme
was vigorously at work; through the instrumental use of anthropology and
ethnography to discover, classify and document the indigenous populations.
On the basis of the ideas generated through such discourses, the system of
Inner Line Permit\(^\text{15}\) was implemented to demarcate certain areas as protected
zones. Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam 1937-1942, in an address to Royal
Geographical Society of London on excluded and partially excluded areas of
North-East, placed the people in civilizational scale, where he described some
of the indigenous communities like the Dufflas, the Akas and the Miris as
"very primitive people who respond hardly at all to the influences of
civilization". For him, the Nagas of the Tirap Frontier tract were "degraded,
backward type". In their "abode proper", they were "frank and independent by
nature, often a cheerful and hospitable disposition" (Reid, 1942 quoted in

\(^\text{15}\) Inner Line was a unique demarcation of governance, between the hills and plains,
created by the Colonial Government in 1873. It is discussed in Chapter 3.
Baruah 2008, 15). Bodhisvatta Kar argues that the Inner Line “was not only a line in territory; it was also a line in time. The advance of the Line on map was read as progress from pre-capital to capital, from the time of “no law” to the time of “law” (Kar 2009, 60). He further asserts that inner line was “not only a territorial exterior of the theatre of capital - it was also a temporal outside of the historical pace of development and progress. The consequence was that the Anthropological wisdom of the colonial masters recognized some groups in Assam as tribal or backward and thereby keeping them outside the purview of governmentality, segregating the hills from the plains.

Another contributing factor in the germination of the local identity consciousness was to be seen in the context of emerging monetized economy and salaried services in government offices as well as budding industrial outlets (especially tea gardens). The modern discourse of development (and its threat) began to emerge and grow out of it, in which the newly emerging educated class participated and competed enthusiastically. However, increasing influx of outsiders, in the form of the Bengalis specially, and the subsequent installation of Bengali as the official language in Assam instead of Assamese, caused the anxiety of losing cultural identity. This led to a more inward-looking sense of political consciousness amongst Assamese intellectuals. Guha has rightly summarized that under the “constant shadow of a Bengali-Assamese conflict, the growth of nationalism in nineteenth century Assam was a two track process. People were increasingly turning as much to pan-Indian nationalism at the all-India level as to little nationalism at the linguistic-regional level” (Guha 2006, 56).

2.3.1 Migration in Colonial Period and Creation of Otherness

As mentioned earlier, Bengali office-bearers were imported by the British to fill in their office-setups in Assam. This migration of the Bengalis can be seen as triggering factor in creating the Assamese nationalism through the linguistic
route. The Bengalis were both the imitable models for the Assamese educated elites for accessing and exercising modernity; and at the same time, they were also the enemies who were dominating over the job-markets as well as the linguistic-cultural spaces of Assam.

The other important migrations occurred during colonial period were the tea garden labours, Marwari traders, Nepali grazers and Muslim population from the Sylhet. Regarding the coming of tea garden labours by the late 19th century and “the racialized creation of the tea labourers” Jayeeta Sharma argues that

“it was the catalyst for a large South Asian project of cultural redefinition whereby members of Assam’s gentry sought to insert their homeland into an imagined “Indo Aryan” community and a modern Indian political space. Local elites sought to assert their distance from aboriginal labouring coolies as well as indigenous low-caste and ‘tribal’ groups. Simultaneously they claimed kinship with upper-caste Indic groups elsewhere on the subcontinent. As college educated youths returned to Assam, now valorized as their beloved motherland Asomi Aai (Assam, the mother), they presented themselves as modern representative of Assam and India. Language became a fundamental part of the way they imagined the past and present. Based on their Asomiya mother tongue’s historical relationship to Sanskrit and Sanskrit derived languages, the dominant gentry elites claimed intimate ties with a broad swath of high status South Asian groups.” (Sharma 2012, 9)

The much-needed construction of the self and the other for creating identity consciousness was unmistakably stimulated by the above-mentioned series of migrations, and their consequent inter-cultural politics, occurred during colonial regime.

2.3.2 Development of Linguistic Nationalism in Assam.

In the year 1836, Assamese language was officially replaced by Bengali in schools and Administrative offices of Assam. Replacement of the native language, by a foreign one, brought dissatisfaction to the common people; and
especially to the newly emerged educated elites of the region. Assamese was a language of communication among different communities of Assam from the ages. It earned its written form in medieval Assam especially in the hands of Sankardeva. Though different communities of Assam had their own respective languages, Assamese was the lingua-franca among these communities. With such a background, the replacement of Assamese by Bengali language paved the road for further developments in terms of political and other related spheres.

Nationalism is a project of creating otherness – to strengthen the tendency of we feeling among the members of a community. The newly emerged elites and the middle class of Assam found the Bengalis as ‘other’. While the dominant and popular narrative of the replacement of Assamese language by Bengali points towards a conspiracy of the Bengalis, other scholars hold that it was part of the British administration to ‘divide and rule’.

Nonetheless, apart from the conspiracy theory, the tug of war on language helped shaping Assamese language to be a more sophisticated and standard form. Dictionaries and grammars of Assamese language began to be printed for the first time. The educated elites of Assam had to struggle a lot for establishing the distinctiveness of Assamese language. Anadaram Dhekial Phukan wrote a pamphlet which was published by the Baptist Mission Press entitled A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and distributed to the British officials.

The language politics in the 19th century and in the early 20th century made a significant contribution in formation of Assamese nationality. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua were the pioneers in the struggle for restoring Assamese language. Gunabhiram wrote a series of letters in Orunudoi from Calcutta in support of Assamese language. Hemchandra Barua, with his hard efforts, could publish the first Assamese dictionary named Hemkoch.
Contemporary scholarship is divided over the root cause of language conflict in Assam in those times. While the leftists are inclined to hold the British government responsible for their *divide and rule* tactics, the nationalists point towards a Bengali conspiracy in removing Assamese language from the offices in Assam. Apurba Baruah argues for possibility of the both by opining that the Bengali elites of Bengal contributed in fixing Bengali language in Assam, in addition to the divide and rule policy of the British (Baruah 1988).

Apart from the educated Assamese elites, some of the British officials and Christian Missionaries contributed heavily establishing the independent existence of Assamese language. Nathan Brown published the first grammar of Assamese language under the title *Grammatical notices of the Assamese Language* in 1848 where he clearly rejected the official understanding of Assamese as a dialect of Bengali. He outlined the theoretical principles on which the identity of the language was to be sought and found. Miles Bronson published Dictionary in Assamese and English where he claimed that his thirty years of acquaintance with the Assamese people was the basis of his dictionary:

"..the fourteen thousand words here collected, will be found mainly in daily use by the people that no Bengali scholar will understand. Many of these words have been written as they dropped from the lips of the people. While I have thus endeavoured to give the spoken language, I have also inserted the more common Sanscrit words that are used in the Puthis, and therefore known to the people". (Bronson 1867 quoted in Kar 2008, 39)

In 1854, when the British Government and the Christian Missionaries agreed for promoting vernacular education in Assam where the point of debate was language- the vernacular. Miles Bronson insisted that Bengali was not the vernacular rather a foreign dialect. "The common people do not understand that language, written or spoken." On the other hand the British officials felt it on the other way round. With the constant efforts of the Christian Missionaries and from the then educated elites of Assam the first fight of Assamese nation
was overcome. In 1873 through a Gazette notification the British Government accepted the distinctiveness of the Assamese language and replaced Bengali by Assamese in the offices and schools of Assam. Thus the period 1836-73 may be considered the age of linguistic nationalism in Assam.

The language war served as a strong stimulant in fostering the Assamese identity conscious; it helped in affirming a line of divide that was necessary in imagining the self and defining the other. This is evident in the following exclamation of an Assamese intellectual of that time, Balinarayan Bora, who was otherwise an admirer of Bengali culture,

Bengali friends! Don’t think that all the faults lie with the Assamese. You cannot clap with one hand. You are also there at the root of the dispute. Bengalis think of Assamese as uncivilized, when they meet a Bengali they forsake the Assamese; they don’t learn Assamese because they think that it is the language of an uncivilized people. In such a situation how can there be any friendship between Assamese and Bengalis. Do Bengalis in Assam hate Assamese much that not to speak of Befriending Assamese. They don’t wish even to learn Assamese.” (quoted in Baruah, 1988)

After the triumph of establishing Assamese language as the official language, the organized intellectuals extended their nationalist mission in enriching a nationalist body of Assamese literature. The Calcutta based Assamese students formed Asamiya Bhasa Unnati-Sadhini Sabha (literally meaning “Forum for the development of Assamese language”) in 1888, through which the students tried to establish the Assamese language as a rich language through publication of different genres of literature.

2.33 Print Media Capitalism

The emergence of the printing press under capitalism, both the newspaper and other vernacular printed resources played an imperative role in the construction of the image of a nation amongst its members.
The year 1846 was the beginning of print media capitalism in Assam. The first Assamese newspaper *Orunodoi* was published by the Baptist missionaries from Sivsagar in upper Assam. While the overtly visible objective of the missionaries was to propagate the Christian faith in Assam through such publication, this led to the emergence of a standardized form of Assamese language which soon became the foundation for what we can call the Assamese nationalism.

Anderson's thesis of imagination can help in understanding and theorizing the processes of identity consciousness in Assam after the advent of printing technology. For the first time in *Orunodoi* the term *Asomiya* (Assamese) appeared; and started creating the boundaries of nation. After this benchmarked year of the *Orunodoi*, several other newspapers came up which contributed in imagining and constructing the vernacular through Assamese language in print. A list of the Assamese newspapers published during this time is given below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl No</th>
<th>Name of Newspaper</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Orunodoi</td>
<td>1846-1882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Assam Bilasini</td>
<td>1871-1873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Assam news</td>
<td>1882-85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Assam Bandhu</td>
<td>1885-86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mou</td>
<td>1871-73</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Junaki</td>
<td>1889-1904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bijuli</td>
<td>1890-1902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Times of Assam</td>
<td>1895-1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Asom banti</td>
<td>1900-1944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Advocate of Assam</td>
<td>1905-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Usha</td>
<td>1907-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Assam Bandhab</td>
<td>1910-1916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Assam Bilasini</td>
<td>1913-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Asomiya</td>
<td>1919-58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
15 Chetana 1919-1927
16 Milan 1923-60
17 Abahan 1929-76
18 Deka Asom 1935-54
19 Batori 1930-37
20 Jayanti 1938-49
21 Ramdhenu 1950-67 & 1979-80

(Sharma 2006, 116)

It is interesting to note that after Orunudoy, the second Assamese newspaper Assam Bilasini was published by a Vaishnavite xatra of Majuli, primarily to counter the Christian aggression. It reveals how the spaces of the emerging print media were tried to fill in with the vernacular, establishing the boundaries between the self and the other(s).

2.3.4 Line System and Formation of the Tribal League:

By the early 20th century the Assamese middle class became concerned with the large scale Muslim migration that had been occurring from Sylhet to the Brahmaputra valley. With the large scale migration of Muslim population from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan & Sylhet) the indigenous people started losing their lands. This was a concern for the ruling British officials too, which is evident in the following comment of Mr. Llyod in the census report of 1921:

"In 1911, few cultivators from Eastern Bengal had gone Goalpara....... in the last decade (1911-1921), the movement had extended far up the valley, and the colonists now form an appreciable element in the population of all the four lower and central districts....... In Goalpara nearly 20% of the population is made of these settlers. The next favourite district is Nowgong where they form about 14% of the whole population. In Kamrup, waste lands are being taken up rapidly, especially in the Barpeta sub division. In Darrang exploration and settlement of the colonists are at
an earlier stage. They have not yet penetrated far from the banks of the Brahmaputra……. Almost all the trains and streamer brings parties of these settlers, and it seems likely that their march will extend further up the B valley and away from the river before long” (Census Report of 1921, quoted in Das 1986, 28-29)

C.S. Mullan, the Superintendent of 1931 census, holds that “it is sad but by no means improbable that in another thirty years Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam which an Assamese will find himself at home” (ibid, 30). Further Mullan made some derogatory comment towards the Mymensinghias (Mymensingh – a district of present-day Bangladesh, and Mymensinghia is a local term to refer to immigrants from Bangladesh). He holds, “wherever the carcass, there will vultures be gathered together. Where there is waste-land, thither flock the Mymensinghias” (ibid, 30). However, despite such comments and concerns of individuals, it seems that the tackling of the immigration issue was perhaps not a part of the core official agenda of the British at that time. But it created serious apprehension on the part of the Assamese middle class. The anxiety over the encroachment of the alien cultural groups was well depicted in the writings of Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury and others. Guha considers such apprehension of the Assamese middle class as the rise of the little nationalism. He holds,

“This apprehension sustained a powerful lobby of little nationalism both inside and outside the Assam Congress during the three pre-Independence decades. Assamese little nationalism no longer remained during these decades just a middle class or a nascent bourgeois phenomenon. It was fast reaching out to the peasantry, constituted of both autochthons and immigrants, and divided it” (Guha 1984, 42-65).

On the other hand, Udayon Mishra traces the root of Assamese nationalism in the later part of the Ahom rule. According to Mishra, the “process had started during the first Muslim invasion from the neighbouring Bengal in the 16th century, when the people were brought under an Ahom or Assamese banner against the common enemy” (Mishra 1999, 1264-65). However, regarding the
the national consciousness in Assam started with two events during the colonial period (a) the struggle to regain the status of the Assamese language, and (b) the increasing pressure on cultivable land as a result of continued immigration of land-hungry peasants from neighbouring East Bengal which intensified from the early part of the 20th century. While the first was a struggle led primarily by the emerging Assamese middle class which would, in the succeeding decades, play an increasingly hegemonic role in Assamese society, the second factor affected both the tribal and non-tribal Assamese peasants who were being faced with growing land alienation (ibid, 1265).

The couple of decades of the early 20th century show that the tribal and the non-tribal fought together for the land question with the increasing number of immigrants and occupations of land. The then Congress leaderships frequently raised the questions of land alienation and the issue of migration – which they opposed very strongly though they were to be seen taking a different stand on the issue after the independence of the country. The emerging tribal political organization also demonstrated their serious concern and opposition to the increasing migrations. Consequently, the Colonial government introduced the Line System in 1920 to protect the land. It was initially applied in Nowgong and Barpeta sub-division of Kamrup district and gradually spread to other districts of lower Assam. As per the Line System the villages were divided into three types: a) Open Villages b) Closed Villages and c) Mixed Villages. In open villages as per the Line System, immigrants could settle freely. In close villages immigrants were not allowed to settle and in mixed villages a line was drawn where immigrants could settle on one side of the line (Das 1986, 31).

However, though the line system was devised to protect the land from immigrants, the coming to power of the Muslim League encouraged the waves
of immigration through the campaign of “grow more food”. In 1937, the Muslim League brought a resolution to abolish the Line System.

Meanwhile in the year 1933, a conglomerate tribal organization under the name and style of Tribal League was formed. Tribal educated elites from different tribal groups like Kalicharan Brahma from the Bodos, Semnsing Engti from the Karbis, Bhimbor Deuri from the Deuri community were some of the illustrious leaders who represented, and raised voices for, their respective communities and areas, being associated directly or indirectly with the Tribal League.

The Tribal League strongly opposed the abolition of the Line System demanded by the Muslim League. Rabi Chandra Kachari, member in the Assembly, commented on the necessity of the Line System in the following words, “There should be a Line System to protect the weak and backward people. Without a Line demarcation it is not possible to look into the interest of the poor people who require special protection” (Pathak 2010, 65).

After several debates and discussions in the assembly, a committee was formed to review the Line system, taking F. W. Hockenhull as the Chairman and Abdul Matin Choudhury, Syed Abdur Rouf, Sayidur Rahman, Rabichandra Kachari, Mahendranath Saikia, Sarbeswar Baruah, Kameswar Barua and A.G. Pattron as the members of the committee. The Committee came up with a report in 1938 where a middle path was suggested as an alternative to Line System. As per its recommendations, a larger unit of restriction should be adopted (like a Mouza or block) so that they can be protected from the encroachers, instead of drawing a line. However, implementation of this report was set aside during to the political turmoil of the Second World War and the Quit India movement. In 1942 after the resignation of the Bordoloi Ministry in Assam for the Quit India movement, the Sadullah Ministry of the Muslim League came into power in Assam. The Sadullah Ministry not only encouraged migration but also allotted land on
payment of Rs. 5/ per bigha¹⁶. As such, the recommendations of the review committee on the Line System for creating tribal belts and blocks were taken for implementation only in 1949 (Das 1986, 37) when Bordoloi Ministry again came to form the state government of Assam in independent India. But by that time, the tribal belts and block were found considerably occupied by non-tribals. Amidst the creation of tribal Belts and Blocks, the Bordoloi Ministry formed an Advisory Committee which was headed by Gopinath Bordoloi, Rupnath Brahma, R. J. J. M. Nichols Roy, Aliba Imti, and A.V. Thakkar to look the issue of tribal development. This committee came up with a report and recommendations of forming Autonomous Councils and regional councils for the hill populations. In a retrospective analysis, Gohain has opined that the reason for creating tribal Belts and Blocks by the then Assam Government (i.e. the Bordoloi Ministry) was its intention to minimize the Tribal politics (Gohain, 2002).

2.3.5 Rise of Tribal Politics in Assam

Historically, the political articulation of different tribal identities (specially the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley) in Assam started with the emergence of Tribal League, which has been mentioned above. The League, headed by most of the Tribal elites, demonstrated a conglomerate tribal identity for the holistic development of the tribal population.

"The early 20th century saw the emergence of various associations within these communities, which culminated in the emergence of the Tribal League in 1933. A direct cause and effect relation cannot be established between those early quasi-political organizations and the Tribal League, but their importance, in shaping the nascent political and socio-cultural consciousness of the people is undeniable. The Mel, inspired tribal conventions (like the Kachari convention, Miri convention, etc), matured the nascent "tribal" consciousness, which resulted in the

¹⁶ a unit of measurement of area of a land
formation of the Tribal League as a mode of organized tribal politics" (Pathak 2010, 61-62).

Pathak again argues about the newly emerged educated and political elites. She holds, “In their effort to “develop”, “uplift” or “improve” the conditions of the tribes, various attempts were made by this emerging leadership to locate the reasons for their backwardness and to introduce reforms in social practices. Their attempts to redefine tradition, adjusting to colonial modernity, were also the first steps towards the construction of the tribal identity” (ibid, 62). The conglomerate tribal politics in the pre-independent situation dealt with the issues of land-encroached by the immigrant Muslims\textsuperscript{17}, set up of schools in the tribal dominated areas and other such issues. Due to continuous increase and influx of Muslim population from the Sylhet region (presently in Bangladesh), who were documented as land-hungry people in the colonial records, the local especially tribal people started losing lands. Initially, some measures were taken by the British Government in pre-independence times to neutralize such tribal aspirations. An important measure was the introduction of the Line system in 1920, which was implemented to safeguard the tribal land. In the post-independence period, the state government of Assam under the Chief-Ministership of Gopinath Bordoloi further introduced the Tribal Belts and Blocks to safeguard the tribal land.

From its inception, Tribal League had been raising serious concerns towards the development of the tribal population of Assam. In response to the demand of the League, the then Government of Assam reserved four seats for tribal people out of 108. In 1937 election, Rupnath Brahma, Kark Chandra Doley, Dhirsing Deuri and Ravi Chandra Kachari elected as the member and Bhimbar Deuri nominated by the Government of Assam. While the rise of a new set of educated and political elites started raising the different issues of their

\textsuperscript{17} Immigrants from the Sylhet district of East Pakistan, presently Bangladesh
communities, it also contributed to the increasing visibility of the ethnic elements in the identity politics in Assam.

The rise of tribal politics in pre-independence times was an important turn which can be seen as the beginning of a new discourse of ethnic politics that later overshadowed the political landscape of Assam. A group of tribal educated persons came forward against the discriminations made by the caste Hindu society towards them. They highlighted the backwardness of their respective communities; and the Tribal League functioned like a pressure-group for the holistic development of the tribal population.

It is important to note that the formation of the Tribal League needs to be seen as a culmination of the increasing confrontation of the tribal population with the non-tribal caste Hindus. Prior to the formation of the Tribal League, the Bodo Students Union was formed in Cotton College in 1920 where Khagendra Narayan Brahma was the President and Satish Ch. Basumatary was the Secretary. The first Bodo journal entitled *Bibar* was published in 1924. The name of Kalicharan Brahma is associated with the renaissance of the Bodos during the late 19th and early 20th century. Influenced by the Brahma Samaj during his stay in Calcutta, he propagated the *Brahma Dharma* which got popularity among the Bodos. Kalicharan was concerned with causes of backwardness of the Bodos; and was critical about some of the practices of his community which he thought unhealthy. Sacrificing animals in different rituals, rearing pigs and poultry in unhygienic condition, drinking of liquor are some of the vices that he felt to be eliminated from the society. Moreover he encouraged to establish the first *Mahila Samitee* (Women's Forum) among the Bodos. For the unemployed youths, he established carpentry and weaving centres for generation of employment. Moreover, Bodo Mahasanmilan was also established taking Jadavchandra Khakhlary as the first President where 'Mahasanmilan' adopted different resolutions in its conferences on issues pertaining to women, such as, bride price and marriage by capture. Kalicharan submitted a petition to the then Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara A.G. Lainy

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18 A cult of worshipping *Brahma* - one of the trinity of Hindu gods
to allow them to write the title Brahma which was subsequently granted (Banerjee 2006, 57).

The growing political consciousness of the Bodos about their distinctive existence well reflected in the memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission, which visited Assam in 1929. The Bodos of Goalpara district submitted a memorandum to Simon Commission. In the memorandum, the Bodos demanded separate identity in the Census. The text of their demands in the memorandum was as follows:

1. That the Bodo Community forms a considerable portion of the population of the district of Goalpara and its numbers is about 1 Lakh 50 thousands. In the whole province of Assam its numbers are eight Lakhs. A large number of Bodos live in the district of Jalpaiguri and Cochbihar in the province of Bengal. Out of One Lakh and fifty thousands, some thousands have been treated as Hindus which is the cause of decrease of Bodo population in the district of Goalpara. The Bodos have a distinct civilisation of their own. There should be a separate category as 'the Bodos' in the Census report. The history shows very clearly what part of this community is playing in the history of Assam during the time of great Epic, the Mahabharata. Many kings who rules over Assam belonged to this race. Bhismak Raja, Bali Raja, Ban raja and Viswa Singha all belonged to this race and history will prove how influential once they were.

2. The people of this race are born warrior and even now many people have listed their names in the military under the British Government. The original proprietor of the Bijni Estate and Cochbihar Estate were people of this race. But in the course of time, they styled themselves as Hindus. Their Estates are still existing but are totally ignored. We belong backwards, failed together to place the opinion of our community before. So we could not submit the memorandum in time and we hope that you will be pleased to accept it and to consider it favourably for your decisions as regard Indian constitution, will make a distinctly new stage in our political life.

3. Electorate: In our opinion, there should not be mixed electorate. Each section of the people should have the liberty of sending their representative in the local councils. The peculiar position in which we are placed offers as practically no chance of sending our representative in which, though there is large number of voters in our
community. Out of the total population of the whole district of Goalpara which numbers about six lakha eighty two, three lakhs sixty nine thousands three hundred ninety seven fall under the heads of non-Mohammadians. Non mohammadians means Hidus, Christian, Jains, Sikhs and the like. A liberal view of the thing shows that we cannot enjoy the advantage of the reform as other community does. Inspite of our being in such a large number all advantages of the reform are being enjoyed either by the Brahmins or by the Khatriyas or by the Sudras. So in order to safeguard the interest of our community we should have a separate representative in the council.

4. In our opinion, there should not be a second chamber in the local council.

5. At present there are certain restrictions which debar many to exercise the right to franchise. This should be removed and more liberty be given for that purpose. There should be four seats in the central legislature one for Mhohmmadians and three for non Mhmmadians; and one of the three non-Mhmmadian seats should be reserved for the Bodos of Assam.

6. Territorial pre-distribution: Some interested persons of our district are agitating for the transfer of the district of Goalpara over to Bengal. As far as we are concerned, we opposed it. Goalpara is a part and parcel of Assam and history will prove what part she has been playing since time immemorial. The habits and customs of the people of the district are more akin to Assamese than Bengalees. The transfer of the district to Bengal will be prejudicial to the interest not only of this community, but all the communities, and this transfer will seriously hamper our progress in all directions.

7. We also desire to put it before you that there be sub-division either at Kokrajhar or at Haltugaon within the subdivision of Dhubri. The community should be benefited as "listed community" and more opportunity of employment be given.

8. Education and appointment: We the undersigned beg to lay before you that this community should receive special treatment at the hands of the Government in matters of education and appointment. Our community is most backward in point of education. Such being the case, our people are always misled. They cannot understand the value of reform. They cannot save themselves from the hands of the foreign money lenders. To remove this drawback there should be compulsory pre-primary education and special scholarship for going facility
9. A large number of sepoys are included in the Gorkha regiment and are generally known as Gorkha. To our opinion, there should be a separate regiment as the ‘Bodo Regiment’ for the Bodo people of Assam.

10. Local Boards: The chairman of the Board during the term of their office-Big land holders should not be allowed to stand for election from general constituency. There is no objection if they are given special seats in the boards.

11. In matters of Board election under the Dhubri local Board, our community should have separate electorate just like the Mhammadians-under the thanas of Bilasipara, Kokrajhar, Bijni and Dhubri. The Bodo people who are in the majority in those areas should have separate seats at the Dhubri local Board. As stated before, our peoples are illiterate and ignorant. So they are easily misled by others at the time of elections and consequently, the people of other communities are elected. In view of the literacy ignorance and influence of other communities are earnestly pray, so that we get separate seat in Dhubri Local Board. Such is also the condition of the Goalpara Local Board. There too we want separate seats.

12. In conclusion. We beg to lay before you that, if require, any one of us is willing to appear before you and to given evidence. (Das 2012, 116-119)

In the sixth point of their memorandum, they have identified themselves as Assamese. However, they were not enjoying comfortable space within the increasingly Hinduized societies of the Assamese-speaking populations. The culturally hegemonic attitudes of the caste Hindu Assamese compelled them to maintain sufficient distances in the society. The exclusionary politics and the hegemony of the dominant section will be discussed in the later paragraphs.

As discussed above the period is also responsible for a conglomerate tribal politics officially emerged in 1933. The different kinds of discriminations faced by the tribal students in the colleges, hostels from the upper caste Hindu Assamese fuelled the rise of Tribal League and it came up with different demands pertaining to tribal development for equal rights with other caste Hindu people. The life history of Bhimbar Deuri shows how he fought against the caste based discrimination by the tribal students in the hostels of Cotton College in the 1930’s decade, as well as his fight against such discrimination.
2.4 Post-colonial Situation: Assamese Hegemony vis-à-vis Counter-hegemonic Politics of Ethnonationalism

After coming of the national independence in 1947, the reorganization of the states in linguistic line and adoption of developmental models were challenging agendas for the native law-makers in the context of the diversities of population in terms of race, caste, religion and geography. The pace of development in terms of education and other factors, and the accumulation of capital were not similar to all the communities and regions in colonial period. Theoretically it can be argued that the people who were sanskritized first were also westernized first\(^\text{19}\). But to some extent some tribal groups were also westernized directly by adoption of Christianity and western education. Through this direct route, a set of educated elites could come forward with their expectations for political placement. They reacted strongly against the hegemony of the dominant section. It however started with the language politics; and later grew bigger in Assam in the post-colonial series of political consequences.

2.4.1 Language Politics.

The language has always been a site of contestation in the politics of Assam, both in colonial as well as post-colonial situations. The Language Policy of the state, and its related politics in the post-independent period in Assam, was the major cause for the emergence and growth of the ethnonational politics in Assam. Assamese language had been the medium of communication among different tribal groups of Assam (both divided & undivided Assam). The different ethnic groups learnt Assamese spontaneously in the educational

\(^{19}\) The first Assamese version of Bible was translated by an upper caste Brahmin named Atmaram Sarma. Moreover, most of the Government officials, educated youth belonged to superior caste in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. It shows how the upper caste people were first influenced by the colonial modernity as its first consumers.
institutions. In the year 1960, the Assam Government tried to impose Assamese language as the official language, making it the medium of instruction in the educational institutions. With the continuous pressure from Asom Sahitya Sabha, the then Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha brought the Language bill in Assembly in 1960. Covertly, it was a part of the hegemonic agenda of the dominant Assamese for inclusion of the other non-Assamese-speaking groups under its fold. But it worked reversely.

The Bengalis of the Barak valley first asserted; and on 19 May of 1960 eleven Bengali people died in police firing. These 11 people are considered as Bhasha Swahid (martyrs of language) in the Barak valley. In addition to the Bengalis, the other tribal groups joined the Bengalis in the protest against the imposition of Assamese language as the official language. The different tribal groups including Khasi, Mizo, Bodo joined the All Assam non-Assamese Language Conference held in Silchar on 2 July 1962. It adopted a resolution which goes like that:

“The conference of the non-Assamese speaking people of Assam strongly opposes the move to impose Assamese as the official language for the state of Assam and that the status quo based on the intrinsically multilingual character of the state must be maintained for the peace and security of the eastern region of India” (Bhaumik 2010, 75).

Regarding the imposition of the Assamese language former Lok Sabha Speaker and an influential politician of Meghalaya hold, “We all spoke Assamese, we still can. But we are not Assamese, so we would not accept the imposition of Assamese, That’s why Assam broke up” (ibid, 75).

Protests were made, against this official step, from different ethnic groups who had been otherwise learning Assamese spontaneously. The imposition of Assamese language can be attributed to the hegemonic mind-set of the Assamese-speaking caste Hindus; and their political imagination to include the tribal groups under the Assamese label. However, this forcefully imposed
agenda of inclusive politics got a setback; and worked reversely with the emergence of the politics of exclusion amongst various tribal communities. The Bengalis of Barak valley started agitating against the imposition and eleven people died in police firing. All the tribal groups of the then undivided Assam viz. Khasi, Naga, Jayantia, Bodo, Mizo protested against this move of the Assam Government. The formation of the All Hills Party Leaders Conference (AHPLC) was a major move to divide Assam by taking all the hills as a separate state excluding Nagaland.

In the APHLC (All-Party Hills Leaders Conference) Meeting held at Tura in 1960 adopted the following resolutions, which show the grievances and the problems faced by the tribal students through the adoption of the language:

1. The position and conditions of the Hills people in Assam are such that the acceptance of the Assamese language, now or any time, which would place the Assamese in a more dominant position, will lead to the assimilation of all the Hills people in the Assamese community, thereby gradually leading to the disintegration of their identity as distinct communities in India, which identity has been recognition and protection under the Constitution.

2. The imposition of the Assamese language will overburden the Hills people with too many languages (Hindi, the Vernacular, English and Assamese) in different scripts.

3. The adoption of Assamese as the official language of the state will adversely affect the opportunities and prospects of the Hills people in the Government services and other avocations notwithstanding any amount of safeguards which can always be circumvented.

4. There is no justification for the declaration of Assamese as the official language even from the population point of view, as less than 50% of the population have Assamese as the mother tongue.

5. The move has already created discord, disruption and violence among the different language groups of the state, thereby defeating the very purpose which an official language is indented to serve.

6. The imposition of the language by law will more create more chaos and insecurity in this frontier states, which will be
catastrophic especially in view of the Chinese aggression (of 1959)

7. Assam being India in miniature inhabited by people of diverse races cultures and languages, the proper official language should be Hindi. Meanwhile English should continue as the official language until such time as the people of the State are ready to adopt Hindi as the official language. (Chaube 1999, 132)

In different APHLC meeting the issue of language always was a matter of discussion. Finally when the Assam Government adopted the language Bill, the APHLC meet held at Haflong, resolved that

"Language Bill was a clear proof of unfair attitude and the firm determination of the Assamese community to avail themselves of undue advantages and thereby enhance their domination over the hills people and the rest of the people of the State of Assam."

Finally with the growing movement from the hill tribes of North-East India, Nagaland was created in 1963, Meghalaya in 1969 and Mizoram in 1971. Once the Hills question was solved by reorganizing the state of Assam, the plains tribals asserted in the similar line as Assamese leadership adopted similar policies to the rest of the tribal groups.

The case of the Bodos can be cited here. With the establishment of the Bodo Thunlai Afad (Bodo Literary Society) it became a dominant political and literary organization for the community since 1952. Bodos initially used Assamese script for the language, but in 1974 Bodos adopted the Roman script for writing Bodo language. Before that, the then Assam Government had agreed to use Bodo language as medium of instruction with Assamese script in the Bodo dominated areas. But after the Bodos switched over to the Roman script in 1974, the Assam Government stopped financial grant to Bodo medium schools. In the script movement of the Bodos, several people died and others got arrested and punished. When the Bodos approached the Central
Government to resolve the script issue, the Central Government ironically offered them to accept neither Assamese nor Roman script but the Devnagari script. Thus the Bodos caught between “a lion and a crocodile”. At last, the Devnagari script was officially adopted but it created split in the Bodo society.

The demand of making Assamese as the medium of instruction in the Universities of Assam viz. Gauhati and Dibrugarh and its affiliated colleges led by All Assam Students Union in 1972 marginalized the other languages. In 1986, in the first regime of Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), under the leaders of the Assam movement, Assamese was made compulsory as the third language for non-Assamese medium schools through the circular of SEBA (Board of Secondary Education, Assam). The hegemonic imposition of language to other ethnic groups who bear distinct cultural and language obviously brought dissatisfaction amongst them. This government imposition, which received parallel support from the Assamese intelligentsia and the nationalistic organizations like Asom Sahitya Sabha and All Assam Students Union, created frontal war between the Assamese-speaking section and the non-Assamese others. Moreover, the different communities who had fought for the establishment of their respective languages in the primary or secondary schools, and subsequently granted the same in due course, were deprived from financial grants. Eligible teachers were not appointed in those schools which became ill-equipped for development of the different tribal languages. Thus the hegemony of the Assamese ruling class began to be recognized by the tribal populace, creating the obvious suspicion of the tribal masses towards the Assamese.

As most of the tribal languages did not have scripts of their own, the Assamese script had been used by them. However, imposition of Assamese language resulted in the counter-hegemonic inclination of the various tribal groups towards the Roman script – divorcing their existing practice of using the Assamese script. The script movement of the Bodos started in 1974 was tried to be suppressed brutally by the then Assam Government. Like the Bodos, the Karbis were also mobilizing similar moves for switching the script.
In 1973, a public meeting was held at Diphu, to discuss about the script for Karbi language. A proposal was adopted in the meeting where it resolved that “the Roman Scripts shall be adopted for writing the Karbi national literature and henceforth all Karbi text books to be used as Karbi vernacular subject at the LP schools level should be written in Roman Script” (Rongpher 2005, 72-78). The meeting constituted the Script implementation Committee to give pressure the Autonomous District Council. In the Script movement received fierce reactions from the Government and many people were wounded. However, in 1978, Autonomous District Council adopted the resolution to use Roman Script for Karbi language.

Though, language is a cultural issue, a tool for asserting identity, but it has direct link with other economic and spheres of social and political life. The language policy adopted by the ruling Assam Government is mostly dominated by Assamese people, supported by Assamese elites, intelligentsias and other nationalist organizations for aggressive cultural homogenization. At the same time the same state and intelligentsias accept the diversity and distinct cultural heritage of the region. The language of ethnicity thus, in this line is a bottom up reaction to overcome the hegemonic nature of the state.

242 Cultural Hegemony: Illustrations from Literature.

Hegemony as described by Gramsci is the domination of a group over another and the mutual consent given by the masses (Gramsci 2009). I here argue that cultural hegemony is a suitable conceptual tool for understanding and interpreting the current ethnic ferments in Assam. It is primarily a story of hegemonic intrusion and counter-hegemonic resistance.

The 19th century Assamese literatures provide a huge range of culturally hegemonic constructions and imaginations which were racist; and show the attitude of the caste Hindu Assamese society towards the tribal population. After 1850, a kind of socio-cultural renaissance began to evolve in Assamese
society; and a set of newly educated elites emerged to take the cause of the modernizing Assamese society. As a part of it, Assamese language and literature flourished. If we accept the popular idea that literature reflects the society then the literature produced in 19th century by the emerging Assamese middle class shows the racist nature towards the tribals. The 19th century was a complex time not only in the context of Assam but the India as a whole when the country witnessed the success of the British who could rule the world, embraced their world views, experienced modernity through developments in the spheres like education, administration, working culture and so forth. On the other hand, it was also a period when the local countrymen re-discovered themselves through comparison with their colonial masters: e.g. people of Assam began to be painted with the attributes like laziness and backwardness. The following discussions give us the impression what the mainstream society thought about other communities. These racist and shallow imaginations of the self as well as the other, which becomes evident in any retrospective ethnography of the Assamese literate of that time, provide crucial insights in historicizing the cultural hegemony which is still at work.

Gunabhiram Baruah, in *Asom Buranji*, wrote about the Karbis,

"Mikirs jati, the peace loving people inhabited in between the hills of present Nagaon, Nagahills and Khasi district. In plains also several Mikirs are residing. They can intermingle with our people very much. Our people call them 'dalor mikir' (mikirs living in the branches of tree). They call themselves so for getting favours and love. It can be assumed that Mikir is the derivative of the either hakhamrig or morkot. They are the aboriginals of Assam and ruled by the Kacharis" (Baruah 2006, 13).

For him the term Karbi came from the Sanskrit word ‘kroibya’(flesh) or ‘kroibad’ (raw flesh eater). The shallow knowledge of the 19th century social reformist on Karbis gives the impression how they were treated by the dominant sections. Gunabhiram, being a social reformist of the period, tried to
link the names of all the tribal communities with Sanskrit origin. He explained them in the following way:

Naga: These people live in between the districts of Kachari, Mikir, Manipur and Sivsagar. There were many naked people among them. It can be assumed that from the Sanskrit word “nagna” (means naked) the term Naga originated.

Misimis: These people live in between Abor and Khamti hills. They are highly ethnocentric.

Abor jati: This nation lives in between the countries of Aka and Misimis. From the Sanskrit word Abor, abor term is originated.

Aka Jati: These people live in between the hills of Dafala, Miri, Abor, and Bhoot. The term Aka comes from the Sanskrit word Anka. Earlier they tattooed their body but nowadays it is no more.

Dafala Jati: These people live in between the hills of Bhoot and Aka. They are very cruel and sadist.

Bhoot Jati: Among all the hilly peoples of this region, they are the most civilized. ....... As per the present norms, they can be called as half civilized (ibid, 13-15)

In the first Assamese dictionary Hemkosh, published in 1900, different communities were defined in overtly racist tones. It described the groups like Matak and Maran of upper Assam as ‘said to be very cruel’. The first Assamese newspaper published the news item on Phulaguri Dhewa, an uprising led by lower caste and tribal people of the Nagaon region. That reporting was full of negative comments and judgments about the tribal and low-caste peoples, without going to the area. This piece of write-up, authored by the first Christianized Assamese, described the uprising in a derogatory tone as “when a jackal shouts, others also shout.” The emerging middle class thus took a racist and anti-people stance in every now and then, especially when dealing with the tribal peoples. When the colonial Government imposed

20 First peasants’ uprising in colonial Assam held in 1861 at Phulaguri, Nagaon district of present Assam.

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taxation and increased land revenue, spontaneous protests occurred in different places of Kamrup, Rangia, Patharughat, Phulaguri. The educated elites left no stone unturned to please the colonial masters by describing the protesting tribal communities as the culpable ones. Many elites even translated the pamphlets, hand-outs of these movements into English for the help of the British in suppressing the movement.

The 19th Century in Assam thus shows a disgusting practice of demoralizing and humiliating the local tribals due to a sanskritic mind-set adopted by the mainstream nobles and intellectuals of Assam. The colonial ethnography, which was in its peak at this time, was also an important contributor in this asymmetrical inter-culturalism. It is not difficult to understand that the colonial ethnography influenced the local writers in framing and distancing the indigenous tribals through the Euro-centric ideas of civilization. A representative example of fictionalizing the tribals by non-tribal Assamese writers can be taken from the novel *Miri Jiyori* (1894) written by Rajani Kanta Bordoloi. The present-day Mishing community was portrayed in the novel through a tragic story of illegitimate love between a young couple who ended up losing their lives in the hands of cruel hill-dwellers. This novel, which carries all the flavours of the 19th century traits of romanticizing with the remote rural tribals, was later criticized by Mishing critics, pointing out that the rigid social restriction towards love-relationships between young boys and girls which is described in the novel is actually non-existent in the Mishing society. Moreover, the epistemology created in the 19th and 20th century towards the tribal population was well reflected in the colonial records of the ethnographers and administrative officers. The creation of inner line was one of the reasons of creating polarized identity.

The 19th century social reformists of Assam, adopted the so-called mainstream Indian version of colonial modernity. A frame of identification, which was racial in nature both covertly and overtly, was thus created, in which the 19th century Assamese middle class could associate themselves with the emerging pan-Indian mainstream through the sanskritic route and other vocabularies of
the Hindu tradition. Bringing Parth Chatterjee in the forefront, here we can argue that in 19th the consumers of colonial modernity—the social reformist in one sense celebrated and praised the British as 'the most advance nation in the world' and compared the others with them in one hand; and on the other hand in the inner domain, they revived and celebrated the traditional Sanskrit practices.

These kinds of attitudes got reflected, in the later periods, in the academic institutions of higher learning where tribal students were not allowed to sit or to take food in the hostels with caste Hindu students. There are different jokes, tales anecdote, where such communities were insulted. A popular proverb found in Assamese which was used even by a doyen of Assamese literature, Laksminath Bezbaruah, where not only the women folk as a whole but a community is insulted too.

*Tiri, miri, bhatou kwa*

*Ei tinir axoi nupuwa*

[The women, the Miris (The Mishings) and the ones who speak like parrots are difficult to be trusted]

2.4.3 The Question of Development

The scenario of employment and development in Assam in post-independence times has been constantly marked by the slow progress of industrialization and diminished the job opportunities for the newly educated youths of the region. The limited job available in the Government sector results a tough competition between the tribal educated and the caste Hindu educated youths. The language policy also affects in getting jobs in those sectors, as the knowledge of reading and writing Assamese became criteria to get a job in most of the government departments for employment. The allegation found a considerable basis when a news item came up in a popular English daily *The Assam*
Tribune on 27th March, 1988 where it said that nearly 10000 backlog posts for SC and STs were lying vacant (Daimary 2012). Thus, the employment policies failed to bring hopes and satisfaction for the ethnic groups as belonging to a free and developing democracy. Such hopelessness stimulated several educated but unemployed individuals belonging to the deprived communities to search for possible solution against the injustice of the dominant section.

In a multicultural society, the relative deprivation theory is one of the major focuses of attention to see the ethnic question. Paul Brass, on relative deprivation theory in relation to ethnicity formation, holds that “a feeling of frustration or relative deprivation defined as the balance between goods and conditions of life which people believe they are rightfully entitled and the goods and conditions they think are capable of attaining or maintaining, given the social means available to them” (Brass 1991, 42).

Such conditions of relative deprivation are found abundantly in North-East India. The different claims and allegations made by different ethnic groups, civil society organizations, regional political parties; about the differential treatment received by them in every sphere from the Government as well as the mainland India exemplifies the rhetoric of deprivation in the identity question. In all India level the people of North-East in Delhi or in other metros of the country face terrible racism, from the people of mainland India, where tribal people of the Assam or from other states of North-East faces similar attitudes from the dominant section. Moreover, when development of a region or people is commonly understood in terms of economic growth, industrial infrastructures and modern technological amenities, relative deprivation is felt when such parameters are compared between Guwahati and Delhi in the national level or between Kokrajhar and Guwahati at the lower scale.

Ted Gurr, in his Why Men Rebel, describes the relative deprivation as the “perceived discrepancy between value expectation and value expectancies in a society” (Gurr 1993, 13). As per Gurr due to the relative deprivation ethno political movement occurs in four stages:
i) Ethnic groups have to recognize that deprivation in society exists.
ii) Their wretched condition is not experienced by other groups and some groups are enjoying what they are not.
iii) The deprivation is not only inequitable but also unfair.
iv) Political action will change the existing condition. (ibid)

The Gurr model of ethnicity formation through relative deprivation can be applied to the existing scenario of the North-East Indian part.

The Developmental approach developed in the late 80's holds that "ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness forms 'the essential independent variable that leads to [ethnic] political assertiveness and militant separatism, regardless of the existence of inequality or dominance'. .... developmental approach argues that distinct communities prefer to be governed poorly by their ethnic brethren instead of wisely by aliens since rule by aliens is degrading for the community" (Phadnis & Ganguly 2001, 40).

The development model in this juncture led by the state is somehow seen to ignore the local issues and cultural behaviours. Examples can be drawn on the use of natural resources, like the forests resources and rivers, where local communities are not part of the development processes. Traditional ways of agriculture, livelihood are being replaced by the modern means without having adequate infrastructure and market. Such kind of models of development also leads to alienation of land, displacement, and poverty of the indigenous population. The displacement of the indigenous population due to massive urbanization, development projects (big dams, industry, establishment of educational institutes, broadening of highways) are some of the issues which are relevant and crucial in the context of Assam. Along with the same, non-compensated loss of land due to erosion, natural calamity, conflict etc. are some other forces of displacement here. All these causes have become the constraint to inclusive development of the indigenous population in North-East India in general and Assam in particular. The different measures of development led by the state reversely helped to emerge a set of new elites.
from different communities. Participatory development of the community and thereby sharing of different development measures are found to be minimal mostly in the tribal dominated areas. Gohain holds,

"...The persistence, indeed aggravation of the colonial pattern of underdevelopment in the state with the Indian state filling in the void left by the departure of British imperialism, has provoked this type of response. To be sure, the Indian Constitution also allows a certain measure of self-government to the states. But in the absence of a proper strategy of development for neglected regions in the centre where power is concentrated a set of power-brokers have arisen in the North-East without any concern for genuine regional development" (Gohain 1996, 2067).

Thus, the different ethnic communities feel relatively deprived in case of employment, development, education which brings dissatisfaction and exclusion. The caste Hindu Assamese elites always have been occupying the administration and other offices, without giving proper interest in the problems of the tribal which is quite a common allegation. It is a tragic irony for the local inhabitants of Assam and the North-East that the bureaucrats of the Indian administrative and allied services are sent to serve in these regions as ‘punishment transfers’ – which is rather an openly accepted etiquette of the Government functionaries.

2 4.4 The Assam Movement (1979-85):

The Assam movement was started in 1979 under the aegis of All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad. In 1979, Hiralal Patowary, the Member of Parliament of the Mongaldoi constituency, died and the by-election was announced to get a new representative elected. In the electoral process, it was discovered that the number of voters in Mongaldoi constituency increased abruptly. It was a popular belief that the increasing number of voters was not natural but due to the massive influx from Bangladesh. AASU demanded for deletion of the illegal voters from the voters
AASU, along with Asom Sahitya Sabha (a literary society with nationalist sentiments and enjoying mass popularity) and the Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (which was formed solely to lead the struggle against the illegal migrants) started a movement against the illegal influx into Assam. The movement got massive support from the Assamese peasantry, both tribal and non-tribal, who had the fear of losing land. The movement ended with the signing of the Assam Accord, after an agreement between the student leadership and the Indian Government in 1985.

Though almost all the tribal groups of Assam supported and participated in the movement in the initial phase, the Assamese leadership failed to keep on earning the trust from the tribal leaderships after the movement. During the high time of the movement, it was a popular demand to evict the encroachers from the reserved forests and from the government lands. Incidentally, some of the indigenous tribal communities, especially the Bodos, were occupying substantial portions of the reserved forests for cultivation and settlement. As mentioned earlier that they were one of the earliest settlers in the region, the leadership of the Bodos were reasonably dissatisfied the call of the Assam movement to evacuate the reserved forests. As such, communal clashes broke out in many places like Gahpur and Phulung Chapori. There were several other incidents in which suspected illegal migrants and many indigenous people were killed due to the chauvinistic actions of the Assamese language speaking caste Hindus (Gohain 1995). A major catastrophe during the Assam movement was the Nellie massacre in 1983 in which large numbers of (officially less than two thousand) Muslim minority peoples were killed in a single day, in a place called Nellie in central Assam. Kimura, in her extensive research on this incident, has discussed through retrospective recollection of that black day by its various stakeholders. It was revealed by the respondents that the local tribal leaders of the Tiwa group were initially encouraged by the central leadership of the Assam movement to make an assault on the minorities (Kimura 2013). But after the magnanimity of the massacre was flashed out, the central leadership maintained distances from the Tiwas in
Nellie. Several other incidents of varied intensities began to paint the Assam movement as a hegemonic venture of the dominant Assamese speaking section. This eventually led to a fissure in the collective Assamese identity itself, where political divisions grew bigger between the Assamese speaking caste Hindus in one hand and the so-called tribal populations on the other.

The official agenda of the Assam movement, however, got betrayed as no substantial expulsion of illegal migrants could take place, even after the leaders of the movement were voted to power. The most significant fallout of the Assam movement was rather a much unforeseen consequence: the fracture of the Assamese identity into tribals, non-tribals and minorities.

2.5 Theorizing Ethnonationalism in Assam:

With the forces of the development rhetoric in one hand, and preservation of the culture and identity for increased access to power on the other, the ethnonational politics is increasing amongst the communities in Assam. The hegemonic tendency of the dominant mainstream society has dissatisfied the ethnic groups; and the emergence of educated and politically conscious elites among the ethnic groups who are mobilizing their respective groups for the sake of political visibility and economic development. Paul Brass gives a theoretical model in formation of ethnicity and nationalism in his *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Theory and Comparison*. Brass describes the role of the elites of a particular ethnic community in transforming its basic cultural distinctiveness into some bases of political differentiation.

“The cultural forms, values and the practices of ethnic groups become political resources for elites in competition for political power and economic advantages. They become symbols and referents for the identification of members of the group, which are called up in order to create a political identity more easily. The symbols used to create a political identity also can be shifted to adjust to political circumstances and the limitations imposed by the state authorities” (Brass 1991, 15).
In the transformation of an ethnic group to a nationality (political identity), Brass discusses about the processes of reviving cultural symbols like language, religion for a homogeneous identity, which plays significant role in such transitions. The second stage of transformation of the group involves the articulation and acquisition of social, economic and political rights for the members of the group as a whole. As such, an ethnic group aspires to achieve and maintain their rights through political mobilization; and transforms it to a nationality. Moreover, in the ethnicity construction, the elite competition is also an important factor, as elites transform an ethnic group to a political identity. This process involves competitions and conflicts between and within the elites of different ethnic groups for political power, economic benefit, and social status. The elite competition to capture some of the state resources like government job, power sharing are other significant dimensions for the construction of ethnicity and nationalism. Genesis of Assamese nationalism as well the various ethnonationalisms in Assam at present lie in the same ambit. How the Assamese elites found the Bengalis as their enemy or contestant in the late 19th century has been discussed earlier. In contemporary times, the educated tribal elites also have found the Assamese as their contestants.

Ethnic consciousness has several connotative manifestations. Primarily it is meant or proposed for political, economic and other all-round development of the community as a whole by practicing political autonomy inside the existing state or by demand of separate territory. Apart from the political rhetoric of ethno-national manifestation, it also exhibits revival of the expressive cultural behaviors and forms like language, popular performances, folklore, dress pattern, food habit etc. This process of invention of tradition has been noted by Hobsbawm as fulfilling a number of objectives: a) to establish or symbolize social cohesion or group membership b) to establish or to legitimize institutions, status and authority relations or c) to socialize or inculcate beliefs, values or behaviour (Hobsbawm 1983, 9). In the juncture of creating own cultural symbols, it has the tendency of opposing or negating the dominant cultural symbols of its counterparts. These are postulated as shared discourses,
as a matter of ethnic differentiation by the elite or group used as tools of symbolic constructions for identity movements. Renaming of place, the concept of extended and imagined territory, imposing or practicing of traditional dresses in private and public sphere are part of the ethnic mobilization and movement to serve the group's interest. Hence the political movement is a depended variable upon the cultural redefinition, recreation and revivalism, construction and reconstruction. Nagel argues

"Culture is constructed in much the same way as ethnic boundaries are built, by the actions of individuals and groups and their interactions with the larger society. Ethnic boundaries function to determine identity options, membership composition and size, and form of ethnic organization. Boundaries answer the question: Who are we? Culture provides the content and meaning of ethnicity; it animates and authenticates ethnic boundaries by providing a history, ideology, symbolic universe, and system of meaning. Culture answers the question: What are we?" (Nagel 1994, 162).

Further, Homi Bhaba, in *Location of Culture*, further observes,

"It is in the emergence of the interstices-the overlap and displacement of domains of difference-that the intersubjective and collective experience of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural values are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in-between' or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' are difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable." (Bhaba 1993, 2)

The observations of Nagel and Bhaba fit well in interpreting the contemporary scenario of ethnic politics in Assam. Ethnic enclosures have been recreated and cultural contents have been devised to substantiate the ethnic boundaries
in the context of the communities in Assam who are charged with their identity-consciousness. This renewed imagination of self and the other, and mapping the boundaries in between, have been discursively motivated by the politics of distinction—a strategy of making one's group distinct and different from the others, undermining the “shared histories of deprivation and discrimination”. According to Bhaba, the recognition of tradition bestows a partial form of identification. In restaging the past, it introduces the incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition.

Some of the telling illustrations can be brought in for discussion here. Originally the Bodos and the Dimasa Kacharis, the two ethnic groups of Assam, belonged to the same greater Bodo stock—as per the reliable accounts of history. In the course of transition, however, the Bodos became the dominant group in the lower Assam and in some districts like upper and central Assam; whereas the Dimasa population came to dominate in the NC Hills (presently Dima Hasao) and in Karbi Anglong. The Dimasas had their own kingdom in Dimapur (presently in Nagaland) and in Khaspur. In the mission of identity construction, the Bodos depended on the oral narrative to form the people’s history. As a part of it, the Bodos claim the Dimasas to be a part of the Bodos which is denied by the Dimasas. In April 20, 2001 the Bodos established a statue of Daimalu—a half mythical character of the Dimasas, in Kokrajhar as a process of reinvention of tradition. But the Dimasas then claimed that the Bodos have hijacked their identity and their iconic hero Daimalu (Sharma 2006, 84). In Bodo identity formation, different folkloric genres are exploited every now and then. “The Bodo oral tradition has been observed to have effectively used to create an alternative genealogy of the Bodo ethnic identity by negating and contradicting the formulations of the dominant Assamese discourse” (ibid, 86).

The Bodos have been scattered in terms of the religious subscriptions to the Christianity, the Hinduism and the traditional religion called Bathouism. As such, some traditions, surnames and names were sanskritized in the course of time. But with the emergence of the Bodo ethnicity, people are seen to be
going back to the pre-Hinduized past. For example, the common surname Basumatary becomes Bismutiary. Among the Sonowal Kacharis, major section of the community was converted to the Neo-Vaishnavism, an ideology propagated by Sankardeva in medieval Assam. The Hinduized and Sanskritized community adopted most of the surnames of the mainstream Assamese society like Saikia, Bora, Hazarika, Das and so on. But the elite section of the community now are asking its population to give up such surnames and to adopt the traditional surnames like Sonowal and some time the name of the clan also.

Such examples can be multiplied. In fact, in addition to names and surnames, a whole range of cultural resources (both material as well as non-material) have been identified as the new heritage for the respective communities. These resources include almost all forms of material and non-material cultural expressions, such as, music, dance, ritual, food, dress, festivals, arts and crafts, etc. These resources, loaded with strong senses of distinctive identities connecting to the people to their desired histories, are the semiotic vocabularies for exercising ethnonationalism within the present-day political and cultural landscape of Assam.

2.6 Ethnonationalism vis-à-vis Globalization:

The period from 19th century to till the last decade of 20th century was the age of nation and nationalism. Nationalism as an ideology creates boundaries – both physical and mental. Towards the later part of 20th century, however, these national boundaries were seen to be facing political challenges from within in one hand, and losing their earlier significances with the rise of the powerful global market on the other. The coming of globalization, the fall of Berlin wall and USSR as well subsequent development in world economic scenario in the late 1990’s brought significant changes in nationalistic ideology. In one hand, neo-liberal market economy and globalization have localized the global and on the other globalized the local. The constant flow of
capital reduced and changed the idea of national boundary and imagination. In the crossroad of the changing nature of sovereign state, the nationalist ideology is reshaped where in one sense national identities become declined or on the other spread of capital as well creation of new middle class resulted intensification of the nationalist self-assertions. The different market forces, globalization and neo-liberal market economy, minimized the national identity where minorities, smaller ethnic communities were the worst sufferer of such phenomenon. The proto-national bonds, popular culture existed among the different ethnic groups became the social capital to assert in the new world order. In such juncture, the ‘invented’ or the ‘imagined’ nation of the 19th and 20th century is taking a new shape with creation of new boundaries. The changes came in the traditional institutions brought by neo-liberal intrigues, cash economy, capital and so forth- the new middle class searched for appropriate rooms in the political arena of the public life. At the same time, though globalization has been understood and experienced as a two-way process between the global and the local, the flow of capital and cultural resources has never been symmetrical and equal to all the stakeholders. This has led to a situation where already many of the weak players were pushed to the corner; and to ensure the minimal cultural identity of an ethnic group, ethnic assertion became one of the weapons. It thus brought significant ruptures in the nationalist ideology of the multi-ethnic states where the progress and development are being experienced in unequal terms by the constituting ethnos. The nationalist sense of belonging to a bigger nation began to be replaced by a new sense of belonging in the ethnic line at the lower scales. Ethnonationalism is thus having both material and cultural bases. The materiality attached to the ethnonational upsurge provides an easier way to mobilizing people.

The adoption of neo-liberal and open market economy in late 1990’s in India shows subsequent development of ethno national politics especially in North-East India. The popular cultures of the communities become the source to imagine the community in modern forms. It thus creates and invents the
genealogy, history of the community widely circulated among the masses to create an alternative identity and through which the political demand for self-rule is negotiated. It starts with cultural nationalism, invention and reinvention of history and tradition and finally emerges as a pressure group.