Chapter II: Socio- Economic Profile of Assam

India is inhabited by multiple ethnic groups who profess different religions, speak different languages, eat different food and follow customs and traditions which are different from one another. Assam has made a huge contribution to the presence of multiple ethnic identities in the country. However, since independence these ethnic groups have been very critical towards the policies of the Indian state and have resisted the nation-building process. These groups have often fought to maintain their traditional self-governing institutions, their language, their cultures, political institutions and the drawing of internal boundaries. To achieve this, they have demanded autonomy in the form of state creation and at the extreme, some groups have demanded for outright secession from the Indian state. This conflict between the state and the ethnic groups has contributed to a large extent the generation of ethnic conflicts in the region. Apart from this conflict with the Indian state, the relation among ethnic groups of the region has also been of a hostile nature. The desire to have dominance and control over land and resources has brought an upsurge in ethnic movements in the region. This upsurge has taken place in a socio-economic context which can be comprehended from an examination of the changing trends of the society and economy of Assam from a historical perspective. We can see how British colonialism as well as the Indian state has been responsible in encouraging the emergence of identity formation, migration, economic underdevelopment and so on in the region. This historical perspective of the changing trends of society and economy is aimed at giving a clear background on the emergence of diverse ethnic groups and conflicts among these groups to protect their identity, language, culture and land rights etc in the state of Assam in post independent India.

Assam is one of the states of India and it is situated in the north-eastern region. The state has 78,438 square kilometers of coverage. The State has two distinct natural regions, namely, the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. The Brahmaputra Valley comprising twenty three plain districts and two hill districts has a total area of 71,516 sq. km and the Barak Valley comprising three plain districts

has a total area of 6,922 sq. km. Its longitude lies at 88.250E to 96.00E and latitude at 24.50N to 28.00N. According to 2001 census the population of the state is 26,638,407. This state is surrounded by Arunachal Pradesh in the east, West Bengal, Meghalaya, Bangladesh in the west, Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan in the north and Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura and Bangladesh in the south. The state of Assam has demographic, economic and strategic significance. Demographically, Assam is the hub of diverse social groups. Economically, Assam is full with natural resources including oil, tea, mineral and water resources. The state of Assam also has strategic significance because three sides of the state is surrounded by foreign countries such as in north Bhutan, Tibet and China, in south Bangladesh and in east by Burma. This has made Assam strategically important.

In the ancient period Assam was known as ‘Pragjyotisa’, the name which is related with the land of tantra, magic and astrology. ‘Pragjyotishpura’ was the capital of the ‘Kiratas’. Vedas, the oldest Hindu scripture, defines ‘Pragjyotisa’ as a land of the ‘Kiratas’ stretching from the foothills of the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south. The Kirata king ‘Narakasura’ is said to be the founder of ‘Pragjyotishpura’. Then it came to be known as ‘Kamarupa’. It is said that the God of love Kama, once tried to tempt the all-powerful Lord Shiva. But, while meditating, Lord Shiva opened his third eye that spewed a flame hot enough to destroy Kama. Later, Lord Shiva, in a compassionate mood, brought back Kama to life. The place where Kama got back his 'rupa' or original form came to be called 'Kamarupa'. In this regard H. K. Barpujari observes, “Assam is known by different names in the epic, puranic and early historical literature. It is mentioned as Pragjyotisha in both the epics- the Ramayana and Mahabharata..........It was known for first time Kamrupa in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudra Gupta and in early puranas.......Assam is apparent by English form of Asom”. Legend apart, like so much of India, Assam too has an old history dating back to the ancient times. We can find the base of Assam's history in various literatures like Tantric literature, Buddhist literature, Vedic literature and Assamese folklore. Reference of Assam is also found in the epics and the religious legends. According to legends, the earliest

99 Internet Source :www.wikipediaencyclopedia.com
100 H.K.Barpujari, “Comprehensive History of Assam”, (Volume I), Publication Board, Assam, 1990

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ruler of Assam was ‘Mahiranga Danava’, who was followed by other rulers namely – ‘Harakasur’, ‘Sambasur’, ‘Ratnasur’ and ‘Ghatakasur’. Narakasur removed the earlier rulers and established his own dynasty. King Naraka was slain by Lord Krishna of ‘Dwarka’ and ‘Bhadradatta’ became his successor. As per history, from 350 AD to 12th century, Assam was mainly ruled by the Barman Dynasty and several other dynasties such as the Kacharis, the Chutias etc. During the rule of the famous Barman king, Bhaskarbarman (600 AD-650 AD), the Chinese traveller Hueng Tsang visited Assam and recorded his trips. Hueng Tsang revealed that the land ‘Pragjyotishpura’ was known as ‘Kamarupa’ in the medieval period. Hiuen Tsang spoke of a powerful and prestigious ‘Kamarupa’ under King ‘Bhaskaravarman’.  

Ahoms ventured into Assam in around 1228 AD and ruled till 1826 AD. It is said that the name of Assam {Asom} associated with the Ahoms. As Gait observes, the word Assam was connected with the Shan invaders (Ahoms) of the Brahmaputra Valley. Another noted dynasty that ruled Assam during that period was the Koch dynasty. The Koches came to the region in 1510 AD. Towards the latter part of the 18th century, the Ahom kingdom weakened due to internal conflicts. Later in 1821, the Burmese invaded Assam and installed a puppet king. Due to this Burmese intervention, the first Anglo-Burmese War broke out. The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 and the East India Company occupied the region. It is to be noted that the story of Assam's ethnic conflict begins more than a hundred and ninety years ago in 1826 when the British conquered Assam, ending some six hundred years of independence. Unlike the rest of India, Assam had success-fully resisted Mughal domination. Nonetheless, in language and religion Assam was distinctly Indian. Assamese itself is an Indo-Aryan language. In the thirteenth century the Ahoms, a tribe from Thailand, crossed into upper Assam through Burma, intermarried with the local population, adopted the Assamese language and, in time, converted from Buddhism to Hinduism. In the sixteenth century Hindu Vaishnavaism spread throughout the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The British East India Company, with its center in Calcutta, gradually extended its control over the entire northeast region and in 1838 Assam was incorporated into the

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101 ibid

Bengal Presidency. In 1874 the British separated Assam from Bengal and placed it under the control of a Chief Commissioner with its capital at Shillong. The province was created by including three Bengali speaking districts of Bengal such as Sylhet, Cachar, and Goalpara. The Sylhet district was a predominantly Bengali Muslim area and most of it is now in Bangladesh. In 1905 the British partitioned the sprawling densely populated province of Bengal into a predominantly Bengali Hindu province in the west and a new province, "Eastern Bengal and Assam." Both the Bengali Hindus and the Assamese bitterly resented the partition. In 1912 the partition was annulled and Assam was reconstituted as a separate province, one that included the predominantly Bengali Muslim district of Sylhet and the predominantly Bengali Hindu district of Cachar and Goalpara. These boundaries remained intact until 1947 when a major part of Sylhet was transferred to Pakistan.103 At the time of India's independence in 1947, Assam consisted of the original Ahom kingdom and the present-day Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram. The State was reorganised with the formation of separate States viz. Nagaland in the year 1963, Meghalaya in the 1972, Mizoram in the year 1987 and Arunachal Pradesh in the year 1987. Contemporary Assam is thus only a portion of what was termed "Assam" only a few decades ago.

Society in Assam:

Assam is a land of varied socio-cultural elements. It is a multi cultural, multi ethnic, multi religious and multi lingual society. Linguistically the Assamese society contains diverse linguistic people such as Assamese, Bengalis, Nepalis, Bodos, Rabhas, Mishings, Tiwas, Karbis and such other linguistic groups.104 Assam is the land where people from all major groups such as the Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhist, Muslims are living together for centuries in peace and harmony. According to the census of 2001, the Hindus consist of 64.88 percent, Muslim consist of 30.91 percent, Christian consist of 3.70 percent, Sikhs consist of 0.08 percent, Budhists consist of 0.19 percent and Jains consists of 0.08 percent of total population.105 A wide range of ethnic group is also present in the region and they have contributed a lot towards the socio-cultural development of the state. A good

number of these ethnic groups belong to the tribal community. Presently tribal population has occupied 12.82 percent of the total population of Assam, while the tribal population of the country is 8.08 percent. The tribal population presently living in the state can be widely divided as – Hill tribes and Plain tribes. Hill Tribes are Chakma, Dimasa, Garo, Hajong, Hmar, Karbi, Khasi, Kuki, Lakher, Mizo, Maan, Naga, Pawi, Syntheng etc. And Plain Tribes are Bodo, Barman, Deori, Hojai, Mech, Mising, Rabha, Sonowal, Tiwa etc. The principal migrants have been the Austro-Asiatics, the Dravidians, the Tibeto-Burmans, the Mongoloids and the Aryans. The Austro-Asiatics, who were one of the earliest to arrive, initially lived in the Brahmaputra Valley, but were later pushed to the hills by the subsequent waves of migrants. The Khasis and Jaintias of present-day Meghalaya are said to be the descendants of this stock. The Dravidians came after the Austro-Asiatics and the ethnological conjecture is that the Kaibarta and Bania communities of modern Assam are descendants of this group. The Mongoloid migration to Assam took place at long intervals and from widely varied sources. They, in general, belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of the Indo-Chinese group. The early waves of this group constituted the ancestors of the present-day Kacharis, Dimasas, Bodos, Rabhas and Lahungs. It is to be noted that these tribes are also living in the hills of modern Assam. The Kacharis are a powerful family and are today mostly known as the Bodos in the Brahmaputra Valley and Dimasas in the North Cachar Hills. The Koches on the other hand are said to be an admixture of the Dravidian and Mongoloid stocks. They are called Rajbangshis in the extreme western part of the State. The Chutiyas in Upper Assam originally settled in the north-eastern tip of the region, but later gave way to make room for the Ahoms, who belonged to the Shan sub-section of the great Indo-Chinese family. The Mishings and the Karbis belong to the Tibeto-Burman stock and inhabit the northern plains of Upper Assam and the Karbi Hills respectively. The Khamtis of extreme Upper Assam and also the Naras, phakiyals and Shyams (Man-Tai and Tai-Turung) belong to the Shan sub-section

107 S. Baruah, “India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality”, Oxford India Paperbacks, 2001, p 177
and are believed to be a group who arrived much after the Ahoms. Assam today has 16 Scheduled Castes and 23 Scheduled Tribes, with proposals for inclusion of more ethnic groups in the two categories still awaiting approval of the Centre. Apart from Sylheti Bengalis, Barak Valley is the home land of Manipuris (Both Bishnupriya and Meiti), Kacharis, Rangmai Nagas and tea garden labourers. H Sriknath observed that the migration of different groups into Assam is not a recent phenomenon. Almost all groups living here seem to have come to this region from different places, at different points in time. It is said that the migration of different races to Assam began 200 years before the birth of Christ. It is believed that the Karbis, the descendents of Austric race, were the first to enter the region. The Kirats belonging to Mongoloid race had migrated from the western part of China and speak Sino-Tibetan language. The tribes like Bodo, Garo, Rabha, Deuries, Misings, Morans, Chutias, Dimasas and Koches (Rajbongshi), Lalong, and Hajong belong to this race. The Kaibartas and Bania from Dravidian race came to Assam from the Mediterranean coast. The Aryans from Cocosian race are said to have migrated through the Gangetic Plain to this region, as early as in the 1st century AD, when the region was called Pragjotishpur and was under the rule of Mongoloid kings. Under the Barman rulers (350-650 AD), Assam was called Kamrup. They invited Brahmin priests and converted themselves to Hinduism. This process continued even during the Salastambha dynasty (650 AD to 790 AD) and Pal dynasty (up to 1142 AD). In the second decade of the 20th century, the Ahoms, who belonged to Tais of Mongoloid race, came to upper Assam through Burma. The Ahoms had to face stiff resistance from the local kings and the tribal chiefs trying to establish their rule, first, in Upper Assam. At that time Lower Assam was under the Koch kings, while a considerable part of what is today called south Assam was ruled by the Cachari kings.110

Society in Pre-Colonial Assam:

Pre-colonial Assam, geographically and territorially was smaller than that of present Assam. The pre-colonial Assam included only the Brahmaputra valley where Ahoms rule was prevalent. The pre-colonial Assam did not include the Surma

valley and even undivided Goalpara District. In this regard Manirul Hussain stated that the pre-colonial Assam included only the undivided district of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Darrang, Kamrup and parts of Karbi-Anglong district. The pre-colonial society was a multi cultural, multi ethnic, multi religious and multi lingual society. The multiplicity of social composition was basically caused by the migration of different races at different periods from different directions. A study about different social groups of pre-colonial Assamese society will enable us to get the idea about the pluralistic nature of social composition of pre-colonial society of Assam.

**Social Groups in Pre-Colonial Assam:**

So far as the society of pre-colonial Assam was concerned it was a plural society. The social groups of pre-colonial Assam were diverse. The Ahoms were the ruling social group of pre-colonial Assam. Along with the Ahoms, some other social groups like Koch, Chutiyas, Bodo-Kacharies, Kalitas, Keots, Muslims, Sikhs and so on were some major social groups of pre-colonial Assam. In this regard Manirul Hussain discusses the social groups with the help of a chart (see the chart-1.1) which indicates the existence of diverse social groups in the pre-colonial Assam.

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Through long periods of history, different ethnic groups migrated to Assam and formed a composite population. These early migrants were few in number and had no choice but to assimilate into the existing population and its culture in order to survive. As each of these groups integrated with the existing society, they lost their separate identities and contributed to the growth of a common Assamese culture. The political frontiers of Assam advanced and receded over the centuries depending upon the compulsions of history, but the geographical limits of the territory were confined by nature in such a way that the people retained their cultural distinctiveness. Even the Ahoms from Burma, who conquered the region in 1228 and ruled for six hundred years, adopted the traditions, culture and language of the original population. Until the nineteenth century, when other Indian ethnic groups expanded into Assam in greater numbers, the Assamese people formed a distinct
homogeneous cultural and linguistic entity among the myriad groups of South Asia.\textsuperscript{115}

In the pre colonial period most of the ethnic groups were not conscious about their ethnic identities and their world was confined to their family clans and villages. The first sociological process has been to develop an ethno-tribal identity which was acquired in the phase of colonial administration.\textsuperscript{116} To quote Ferdinand Banteilang Basan, “Modernization brings in improvement in education, media and technology and increases the levels of competition for jobs. As a result this has made ethnic groups become more aware in promoting their identity and to be very competitive in protecting the limited resources at their disposal from outside invasion. In promoting their ethnic identity, groups make efforts to acquire social, economic and political rights for the members of their group. But surprisingly, it appears that the more the society is modernized, the more ethnic demands are manifested and similarly, the more there is economic development the more there is ethnic conflict.”\textsuperscript{117} Different cultural and linguistic ethnic groups want to retain their tradition and relative prestige while desiring to improve their socio-economic and political status during colonial and post colonial period. For example the plain tribals namely the Bodo-Kacharis, the Rabhas, the Mishings are the major tribal groups of Brahmaputra valley who are now very much conscious about their language, art, culture and religion. Among them those who have already forgotten their past heritage, are now reverting back to their old tradition through revival of language and culture. These entire issues involved competition, conflict and power struggle.\textsuperscript{118}

\textit{Class-Structure of Pre-Colonial Society in Assam:}

The understanding of class structure of pre-colonial society is equally important along with the social groups of pre-colonial society of Assam.\textsuperscript{119} In this regard Amalendu Guha stated that there were three classes in pre-colonial Assam. These are-(i) the Aristocracy, i.e. the feudal landlords, both temporal and spiritual,

\textsuperscript{116} B. Pakhem , “Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity” Omsons Publication, 1990, p1
\textsuperscript{117} Thesis Ferdinand Banteilang Basan, “Ethnic Identities and Issues of Development: A Case Study of Meghalaya”, Centre for Political Studies, JNU, New Delhi
\textsuperscript{118} B. Pakhem , “Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity” Omsons Publication, 1990, p200
\textsuperscript{119} N. Knower, “Society and Politics in Assam”, Book land, Panbazar, Guwahati, 2006, p17
who had revenue free landed properties and service dependent to work. (ii) The service population, i.e. the serfs, slaves and tenants who were exclusively dependent on these landlords and cultivated their land and (iii) the peasantry. Manirul Hussain has broadly classified the class structure of pre colonial society into two classes- (a) Ruling classes and (b) toiling classes. The ruling classes are further divided into three classes- (a) Higher Aristocracy, (b) Middle Aristocracy and (c) Lower Aristocracy {see chart 1.2} 

120 Amlenda Guha, “Planter-Raj to Swaraj- Freedom Struggle and Electoral politics in Assam 1826-1947”, Indian Council of Historical Research, 1977, p 239
The pre-colonial economy of Assam was a semi tribal and semi feudal in nature. The economy of pre-colonial Assam was largely a traditional economy which did not witness any sort of modern economic development such as industrialisation, trade and commerce and currency. Therefore, the mode of
exchange was based on the barter system. Under this system certain commodities were regarded as the parameter of exchange. Even the payment of land revenue and the salaries of the officials were based on barter system. As Amlendu Guha observes, “Medieval Assam had what was essentially a barter economy. Local coinage on a limited scale however started from 16th century. Land revenue was paid in labour as a general rule and in produce or money in special cases. Official received a portion of the contributed labour in lieu of salary.” However, in spite of absence of any sort of modernized economy, the pre-colonial economy was almost a well managed and self sufficient economy. The development of cottage and craft industries under the auspices of the Ahom ruler was another notable aspect of pre-colonial economy. The self-sufficient nature of pre-colonial economy was mostly because of the skill of the Assamese people over different cottage and craft industries. The pre-colonial society witnessed the development of cottage and craft industries based on weaving, spinning, gold smithing, pottering, bamboo, wood, hide and cane etc. To quote with S.L. Boruah, “The economy of Assam was mainly rural cum agricultural and villages were largely self-sufficient. In course of time, however, there grew a class of wealthy people, who carried on considerable amount of trade, both internal and external. Yet, their network develop and urban economy brisk with industrial and commercial pursuits at the popular level. Apart from wealthy few, the rest of the people led neither in plenty nor in poverty because of their wants were very few and the existing social conditions stunted their economic condition.”

Society in Colonial Assam:

The history of Assam reveals that during the later part of their rule, the Ahom rulers had to face certain internal problems. They had to face the internal rebellion caused by different groups, particularly by Mowa Morias and external aggression by the Burmese in 1817 to 1822. The prolonged internal disorder and external aggression indirectly led to the annexation of Assam by the East India

125 S. L. Boruah, “A Comprehensive History of Assam”, Mushiram Manoharlal publishers, New Delhi, 1985, p432
Colonialization of Assam led to the drastic change in demographic composition of Assam. After the Colonialization of Assam, the territorial boundary was extended. It was basically after 1874 when Assam was made as Chief Commissioner’s Province, the territorial boundary of Assam has undergone a drastic change. Thus, the newly created province included the undivided districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sivasagar, Lakhimpur, parts of Naga Hills, districts of Cachar, Garo hills and also the East Bengal district of Sylhet. Extension of territory automatically leads to the inclusion of population with diverse race and culture. Inclusion of the population with diverse race and culture resulted in change in the demographic composition of colonial Assam. It, in fact, contributed towards making Assamese society more and more plural in colonial era. Another important factor contributing towards the demographic change in colonial Assam was the British policy of migration.

The following table shows the demographic transition of different districts of Assam in the year of 1826, 1853 and 1872.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of District</th>
<th>1826</th>
<th>1853</th>
<th>1872</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>387,775</td>
<td>561,681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>89,519</td>
<td>185,569</td>
<td>235,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nawgang</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>241,300</td>
<td>260,238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>About</td>
<td>159,573</td>
<td>317,799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>250,00</td>
<td>85,296</td>
<td>121,267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7 to 8 lacs.</td>
<td>1059,513</td>
<td>1496,705</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Planter Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam by Amalendu Guha.)

The above table shows that the demographic composition of colonial Assam had undergone a radical change with the Colonialization of Assam. It introduced the

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127 ibid
128 ibid, p39
Assamese people to diverse new social groups belonging to different races, having different cultures and traditions and practicing different professions.

**Social Groups in Colonial Assam:**

The Colonialisation of Assam made the society more and more heterogeneous. After the colonisation, the Britishers opened the floodgates of migration of different people from different parts of the country. The colonial Assam had to experience with some new social groups such as the Americans, the Hindu Bengalis, the Marwaris, the Nepalis, the Biharis, the Tea Garden Labourers, the Muslim Peasants and so on during the time of colonial rule. The Britishers were the dominant and the influential new groups in colonial Assam. At the initial stage they came to Assam to rescue the Assamese people from the barbarous invasion of the Burmese. But later on after overthrowing the Burmese, the Britishers did not leave Assam. In the colonial Assam another new social group of European origin was the Americans. The Americans were the members of the Christian Missionary. Their basic task was to expand Christianity, yet, they greatly contributed towards the promotion of Assamese language and literature. Another new social group was the Hindu Bengalis. They were also known as ‘Baboos’ to the local people, were brought in from West Bengal. They came to serve the middle class jobs in colonial administration. The British dismantled the Ahom ruling structure, made Bengali the official language and recruited Bengali Hindus to run the administrative services. By the beginning of the twentieth century Assamese nationalists were pitted against the Bengalis as well as against the British, both of whom were seen as alien rulers. The 1891 census estimated that one-fourth of the population of the Brahmaputra valley was of migrant origin. Thus, the population of present-day Assam that is of indigenous origin may well be below 9.5 million—perhaps only 7.5-8 million. Therefore, the Assamese micro-nationalism began in the middle of the nineteenth century as an assertion of the autonomy and

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131 *ibid*, p 44
132 S. Baruah, “India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality”, Oxford India Paperbacks, 2001, p49-68
133 *ibid*
134 Myron Weiner, “The Political Demography of Assam’s Anti-Immigrant Movement” Published by Population Council Vol. 9, No. 2 (Jun., 1983), pp. 279-292
distinctiveness of Assamese language and culture against the British colonial view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal. To some extent autonomy and distinctiveness is a continuing theme in post-colonial Assamese micro-nationalism, accentuated by the heavy immigration into the area that has produced fears of minoritization among the Assamese and other indigenous peoples. Another numerically small and business class came to Assam along with the British and they were known as Marwaris. The term ‘Marwari’ was basically used to indicate a commercial caste from Rajasthan. The major task of the Marwaris was to act as bankers and commercial agent for the tea planters and also for the peasants. It is said that the Marwaris played a major role in Assam’s transition in 19th century from a largely non-monetized economy to a market economy. The Nepalese were another small labouring community who have migrated to Assam during the period of colonial rule. The migration of the Nepalese was pursued by the Britishers as because they served in British army which was known as Ghurkha Regiment. The Nepalese were also indulged themselves in the business of milk supply by rearing cattle in the grazing areas. Another new social group namely the Biharis were migrated from undivided Bihar. Numerically the Biharis were a small group and economically a poor class. They were involved in some of the arduous activities such as construction of roads, houses and buildings. Besides that some of the Biharis engaged themselves as rickshaw puller, thela puller, barber, washman etc.

The tea plantation in Assam was started in the early part of 19th century. With the development of tea plantation the problem of labour supply became acute in Assam. For expanding tea plantation working hands were the prime necessity and were needed in lots. The colonial government, therefore, encouraged labour importation from other parts of the country mostly from Bihar, Orissa for the tea plantation in Assam. The tea garden workers, who were mostly from Bihar and Orissa, was another new social group of colonial Assam. Racially the tea garden labours were tribal’s belonging to some sub-tribes such as santhals, mondas, kharias,

136 ibid
137 ibid
gonds, khonds etc.\textsuperscript{139} As a result, tea labour folk in Assam is composed of various tribes and castes and belong to various cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritage which display a kaleidoscopic pattern of ethnic mosaic in Assam.\textsuperscript{140}

The largest influx took place after 1900 when Bengali Muslims moved into the Brahmaputra valley from East Bengal. Assam was more thinly populated than East Bengal. Bengali Muslims reclaimed thousands of acres of land, cleared vast tracts of dense jungle along the south bank of the Brahmaputra, and occupied flooded lowlands all along the river. The largest single influx came from Mymensingh district, one of the most densely populated districts in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). By 1911 as many as 118,000 migrants had moved into the district of Goalpara alone, representing 20 percent of the population. In the next two decades the Muslim migrants moved further up the Brahmaputra valley. Though some Muslims had settled in Assam as early as the thirteenth century, this new influx rapidly changed the religious as well as linguistic composition of the state. As Assam's links to the rest of India grew, other migrants moved there as traders, merchants, bankers, moneylenders, and small industrialists.

These various migrants not only transformed the ethnic composition of Assam, they also fostered a political climate in which questions of ethnicity became a vital factor for political parties in Assam.\textsuperscript{141} According to Robert G. Gosselink, “Far from being "instruments of cultural diffusion and social integration," migrant groups often generate new tensions and increase racial, linguistic, and religious conflict. Clashes between indigenous and migrant communities have often been a prominent feature of politics in multiethnic countries. In Nigeria, violent attacks against immigrant settlers precipitated the country's 1967 civil war. In Malaysia, where many Chinese have lived for as long as the native Malays, "antagonism toward the Chinese is always defined in terms of a conflict between indigenous residents ... and Chinese migrants." In Assam, the presence of migrant groups has

\textsuperscript{139}S. Baruah, \textit{“India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality"}, Oxford India Paperbacks, 2001, p49-68
\textsuperscript{140} B. Pakhem, \textit{“Nationality, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity"} Omsons Publication, 1990, p147-153
\textsuperscript{141} Myron Weiner, \textit{“The Political Demography of Assam's Anti-Immigrant Movement”} Published by Population Council Vol. 9, No. 2 (Jun., 1983), pp. 279-292
caused similar tension. The vast number of "outsiders" in Assam has upset the state's once-existing demographic and economic balance and threatens the Assamese culture with extinction. The growing numbers of various migrant and immigrant groups may already have reduced the Assamese people to an ethnic minority in their own homeland.\textsuperscript{142} The new social group, the Muslim peasants were allowed to migrate to cultivate in the wet lands of Assam by the Britishers. The British policy of migration of Muslim peasants was basically the product of the British policy of 'grow more food' which ultimately intended to generate more revenue in colonial Assam. Whatever may be the intension, the fact was that there was a massive flow of Muslim peasants.\textsuperscript{143} Meanwhile, the continuing settlement of Bengali Muslim immigrants destroyed the homogeneity of Assamese society. The immigrants with an alien religion, different languages, social attitudes and behavioural patterns were regarded as pollutants by the Assamese rural folk who valued their ethnic, linguistic and religious affiliations. The prosperity of the immigrant peasants fuelled the Assamese-Bengali peasant conflict. The middle class leadership of Assam taking note of the threats and challenges faced by the Assamese nationality responded to the situation which in turn, gave rise to a number of conflicts between the Assamese and Bengali Muslim in Assam.\textsuperscript{144} In this regard Lucy Zehol observed that “In attempting to enhance the land revenue and augment the exchequer by exploitation of the natural resources of the region, the British found that the shortage of manpower in Assam was the greatest obstacle to the fulfillment of their plans and hence encouraged migration of different groups of people into Assam. Consequently, immigration became a social factor in Assam ever since the development of the tea gardens around 1850. The plantations required a large number of workers, who were conscripted from all over India. After 1891 those workers were joined by Muslims from East Bengal and also from the beginning of the 20th century, unnoticed, by Nepali graziers. Already around 1935, ethnic tension became visible as labourers started to settle down on tribal land to cultivate it. Even so, in the beginning they contributed to the strengthening of the Assamese economy. Later, as they began to settle down, they also contributed to the competition in the

\textsuperscript{142} Robert G. Gosselink, “Minority Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Assam, India”, Published by Boston College of Third world Law journal, Volume 14, Issue 1, 1994 p 1-35
\textsuperscript{143} ibid
\textsuperscript{144} Internet source: www.dspace.nehu.ac.in, “Assamese Nationality Question”, Sajal Nag
Assamese economy for resources, in particular for adequate employment opportunities. Immigration continued and was even speeded up after India’s independence by the development of this region. As a result, some claim that 50 percent of the Assam population is made up of those who migrated from outside at some point in time. The local people felt that this was a point of danger and crisis. This has special relevance to a democratic country like India where the relative number of citizens decides political elections and the distribution of power. In course of time ‘migrant communities’ could gain more and more control over primary sources of livelihood like land and over secondary sources like government jobs. It is to be noted that this state of affairs (immigration) has encouraged the growth of anti-India and secessionist groups amongst the tribals.”

An estimate of increase of Muslim population in the colonial Assam is given in table 1.B

Table 1.B
Increase of Muslim Population in Colonial Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Muslim Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>3,55,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>5,85,943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>9,43,352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>13,03,962</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Girin Phukan, Assam’s Attitude to Federalism, 1984, p.13

The discussion about the social groups of colonial Assam reveals that it was more and more heterogeneous in nature. The colonial Assam witnessed the flow of migration of different groups of people from different parts of India. It has changed the political demography of Assam and, therefore, migration became central issue during the colonial and post-colonial period. Various ethnic groups viewed the state government as an instrument by which to extend, consolidate or transform their position in the economy and social system. In the nineteenth and early twentieth

146 G. Phukon, “Assam’s Attitude to Federalism”, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1984, p13
century it was the Bengali Hindus who used their dominance in the government administration to consolidate their position in the educational system, in the professions and within the state administration itself. In the 1930s and 1940s, when electoral politics were introduced, the more numerous Bengali Muslims won control over the state government of Assam and then attempted to use their position to facilitate further migration of Bengali Muslims from East Bengal, to strengthen their political position and then to press for the incorporation of Assam into the proposed Muslim majority state of Pakistan. The British rejected the demand of the Muslim League, but agreed to partition Assam by transferring Sylhet district to Pakistan.¹⁴⁷

The rapid growth of population and change in demographic composition is one of the causes for the emergence of different ethnic conflicts in the state of Assam in post colonial period. To quote Ferdinand Banteilang Basan, “With population ever increasing and resources become more limited, ethnic groups have started becoming very suspicious of other groups. There is a constant concern that another ethnic group might try to capture the economic resources of another and then proceed towards eroding the culture and lifestyle of that group. Hence, this is the reason why there is so much ethnic tension in the Northeast in general and Assam in particular. Initially when their population was small it appeared that land and natural resources were unlimited but gradually as population kept growing resources became more and more limited. Today, every ethnic group in the Assam is very ethnic conscious, we can see that all ethnic groups are trying to protect, promote and preserve their interests. In this endeavour to promote their own ethnic interest, the region has witnessed so many conflicts and tension against the state and amongst various interest groups. Ethnic interest groups, political parties and insurgent groups who have come up on the basis of ethnicity have been largely responsible to the massive unrest that the region has been experiencing”.¹⁴⁸

Class Structure in Colonial Assam:

The class structure of the pre colonial society was semi-tribal and semi-feudal in nature. That is why Assam did not witness the emergence of any particular


class which could be discussed within the Marxists paradigm of class structure. But the situation changed after the colonialisation of Assam. Colonialisation led to the emergence of certain new class structures in the society of Assam. The class structure were broadly divided into two, namely the outsider’s class structure and the Assamese class structure. The outsider’s class structure included all the emerging classes which have their origin outside the state and who have migrated after the colonialisation of Assam. The Assamese class structure comprises the emerging Assamese classes.\(^{149}\) A comprehensive understanding of the emerging class-structure of colonial Assam can be grasped from chart 1.3\(^{150}\)

**Chart 1.3**

**Class Structure in Colonial Assam**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Structure of Colonial Assam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outsider’s Class Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Britishers, Administrator, Tea planters and Members of Christian Missionaries, the Americans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hindu Bengalis, the Marwaris etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppressed Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea garden labourers, Muslim peasants, Nepalese and Biharis etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assamese Class Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue collectors, Tea Planters, Indigenous Merchantile Class etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assamese middle class who were mostly educated in Calcutta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Assamese peasantry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The class-structure of the colonial society of Assam reveals that the class-structure of Assamese society became more distinct than it was in pre-colonial Assam. The Britishers were the ruling class and stand at the apex of class hierarchy. At the middle range, there was a middle class which basically composed by the Bengali Baboos who served in colonial administration and a petty section Assamese people who basically belonged to caste Hindu and who developed an ally with the

\(^{149}\) N. Knower, “Society and Politics in Assam”, Book Land, Panbazar, Guwahati, 2006, p49

\(^{150}\) ibid
Colonial ruler either in literature, business or in administration. The bottom layer of class structure of colonial Assam was constituted by the Assamese peasants, the Muslim peasants, the tea garden labours, Biharis, Nepalese etc. who were always oppressed in colonial Assam.

**Economic Changes in Colonial Assam:**

Colonialisation of Assam has brought a radical change in the economy of Assam. Transformation of mode of exchange from barter economy to a monetised economy, discovery of local resources and establishment of industries, introduction of new mode of communication like railways, roads were some significant economic changes that took place in colonial Assam.\(^{151}\) According to Gait, “During the century for which Assam has been under British rule and enjoyed the blessing of settled government, its material prosperity has increased rapidly. Its trade has grown and its exports of mustard seeds, potato (introduced in the Khasi Hills by David Scott), silk and other local produce have increased greatly, both in quantity and value......coal has been discovered in various parts, especially in the neighborhood of Makum in the Lakhimpur District and mineral oil has been found at Digboi.”\(^{152}\)

A lot of changes have taken place in the economic life of Assam during the colonial period. Discovery of tea and establishment of tea estates was significant development of colonial Assam. The tea industries could develop in colonial Assam because of the effort of the British officials. After the discovery of the tea in Assam, Britishers started plantation in Assam particularly under the Assam tea company to capture the international tea market and to break down the monopoly of China in tea market. Development of tea industries also benefitted the local people a lot. It provided employment opportunity to the local people in tea estates.\(^{153}\) Table 1.C shows expansion of the tea industry during colonial regime.

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\(^{152}\) E. Gait, “History of Assam”, Surjeet Publication, New Delhi, 2003, p404

Table 1.C

Production of Tea in Colonial Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Tea Estates</th>
<th>Total Tea Garden Land (Acres)</th>
<th>Tea Production (Pounds)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,876</td>
<td>2,16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2,425</td>
<td>3,66,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7,599</td>
<td>1,205,689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>25,174</td>
<td>4,714,769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>31,303</td>
<td>6,251,143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The discovery of petroleum and coal and establishment of refinery was another noticeable economic development in colonial Assam. Captain Wilcox discovered oil-springs and several coal-beds in the south-east corner of Sibsagar District in 1826. Jenkins also noticed several oil-springs in between Barhat and Jaipur. In 1954, Captain Dalton reported the existence of oil-springs at Digboi, Makum and Namchik. As a result the first refinery was established in 1901 at Digboi.\(^{154}\) Another aspect of economic changes in colonial Assam was the development of transport and communication such as railways, road, bridge etc. It is to be noted that communication was developed by the tea planters as an infrastructure of tea industry.\(^{155}\) According to Guha, ‘the planters needed an improved infrastructure, particularly communication. Hence, the construction of railways was started in 1881. The province’s railway mileage was pushed up to 114 miles in 1891 and 715 miles by 1905. At an estimated investment of Rs.131 thousand per mile, the total railway investment made in Assam was not less than Rs.95 million.’\(^{156}\) Thus, the communication was improved keeping in mind the necessity of tea-planters. The Britishers had also changed the land revenue system. Under this new system, the peasants had to pay their land revenue in the form of currency. But sufficient amount of currency was not available in the colonial Assam.

\(^{154}\) *ibid*, p42
\(^{155}\) *ibid*, p43
\(^{156}\) Amalenda Guha, “*Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*”, Center for studies in social Sciences, Calcutta, 1991, p34
As a result of the scarcity of currency, the effect was suffered by the local peasants. Besides this, the multiplicity of currency in circulation such as rajmahari, narayani, sicka etc also created certain difficulties to the illiterate peasants. Table 1.D shows collection of revenue during colonial regime.

Table 1.D
Collection of Revenue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Districts</th>
<th>Year 1832-33</th>
<th>Year 1843-44</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>1,10,181</td>
<td>2,52,991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>41,506</td>
<td>1,35,454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>31,509</td>
<td>1,10,314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>80,843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>34,730</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Rebellion 1857 and its impact on Assam by Debo Prasad Baruah, in Arun Bhuyan eds. “Nationalist Upsurge in Assam”, p.41

Colonisation had introduced the economy of Assam to modern economy. Certain economic developments such as establishment of industry, discovery and establishment of oil refinery, construction of railways and improvement of communication, circulation of modern currency etc greatly contributed towards making Assam’s economy a modern economy.

Society in Post- Colonial Assam:

India achieved her independence at the cost of partition on August 15th, 1947. Partition of the country led to redrawing the territorial boundary of the country. As a result, some of the states had to draw a new territorial boundary. So far as Assam was concerned, she had to lose Sylhet as a result of referendum conducted in Sylhet district. Exclusion of Sylhet from Assam not only led to territorial changes but also the change in demographic composition. 158

158 *ibid, p68*
The demographic transformation during the post-colonial period was a rapid transformation. The population of Assam continued to increase in all the districts. The rate of decadal growth of population was +19.9 percent in 1951. But it has increased tremendously up to +35.0 percent in 1961. Such growth rate even was higher than that of all India decadal growth rate which was +13.3 percent and +21.5 percent in 1951 and 1961 respectively. The percentage increase of population can be understood from table 1.E

**Table 1.E**

**Assam 1901-1991: Percentage increase of Population**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Growth rate, Assam</th>
<th>Growth rate, All India</th>
<th>Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901-11</td>
<td>16.99</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>11.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-21</td>
<td>20.48</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>20.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-31</td>
<td>19.91</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>8.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931-41</td>
<td>20.40</td>
<td>14.22</td>
<td>6.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941-51</td>
<td>19.93</td>
<td>13.31</td>
<td>6.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951-61</td>
<td>34.98</td>
<td>21.51</td>
<td>13.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-71</td>
<td>34.95</td>
<td>24.80</td>
<td>10.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-91</td>
<td>52.44</td>
<td>48.24</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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159 *ibid, p61*
Table 1.F

Population growth trend of Assam and India in 1901-1971

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population in lacs.</th>
<th>Percentage of decadal growth</th>
<th>Density (per sq. Km.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Assam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2384</td>
<td>16.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2521</td>
<td>20.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2513</td>
<td>19.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>2789</td>
<td>20.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>3186</td>
<td>19.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3611</td>
<td>34.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>4392</td>
<td>34.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>5481</td>
<td>52.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India

The district wise growth was also recorded high during the post-colonial period. Except Sibsagar district, all other districts have recorded much higher growth rate ranging in between 35 percent to 45 percent. There were different reasons for such a rapid growth of population during the post-colonial period. Firstly, a large scale immigration from East Bengal contributed towards the high growth of population. Therefore, the district of Goalpara bordering East Pakistan and West Bengal has recorded the highest decadal growth rate (44.12%) during the decade 1961-71. The other causes such as early marriage, lack of proper family planning, the climate change etc. were also responsible for the rapid growth of population.\(^{160}\)

Social Groups in Post-Colonial Assam:

In post colonial period, because of the partition of the country and transfer of Sylhet to Pakistan, the Hindu Bengalis from East-Bengal migrated to Assam. Approximately 2,74,455 and 6, 24,249 of Hindu Bengalis came to Assam in 1951 and 1961 respectively. According to H.Srikanth, “Assam suffered the trauma of partition after independence. The Assamese leaders felt the partition as a blessing that the immigration would come to an end with the partition. But contrary to their

\(^{160}\) *ibid, p62*
expectations, owing to the communal riots that followed the partition, about 15,00,000 Hindu-Bengali refugees from East Pakistan came to Assam during the 1950s and 1960s and settled in Cachar, Nowgong, Goalpara and Kamrup districts. The majority of these Hindu immigrants are currently engaged in the service sector and in small business. However, the Hindu Bengalis cannot be regarded as new social group because the Hindu Bengalis were there in Assam in pre-independent India. Therefore, the social group of post-colonial Assam included the social group of pre-colonial and colonial Assam.

Economic Transformation in Post-Colonial Assam:

In the post-independent India, Assam was one of those states which had to suffer from the development strategy of the Indian state. Assam is among India's economically more underdeveloped areas. However, it is not in per capita GNP that the state lags particularly behind, but in the lack of industrial capacity. With tea gardens occupying a major part of the state's total cultivable land, Assam is probably more of a primary commodity-producing colonial economy that dependency theorists had in mind in their critique of modernization theory, than most other parts of India. As South Asia's last frontier, the area has attracted exceptionally high immigration from other parts of South Asia, especially from the densely populated region of East Bengal that now constitutes the sovereign state of Bangladesh. In 1979-85 protests against Assam's demographic transformation through immigration, that had become illegal after the partition of India, led to five years of political turmoil and major outbreaks of violence in the state.

Economic growth since 1947 has affected different ethnic groups differently in the state of Assam. Some have gained while others have been slower to benefit. The sense of relative deprivation among rival ethnic groups has frequently led to violence. One of the causes of ethnic tension in Assam is the lack of legislation guaranteeing economic rights to Assam's competing ethnic groups. The blame for

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Assam's economic woes lies in part with the central government, which is not paying Assam enough for the goods and energy resources the state produces. Assam is one of India's richest resource states, yet the Assamese people have never received a fair share of the development resources generated by the state. Migrant communities, however, also have had an adverse impact on Assam's economic situation. The presence of Bengali migrants has exacerbated the deteriorating economic condition of skilled and unskilled indigenous Assamese laborers: millions of illegal immigrants have not only added to the problem of massive unemployment in Assam, but also have lowered Assam's standard of living. State government spending on education, health programs and other social services for non-Indians is increasing at the expense of native Assamese, who still provide most of the state revenues. To redress the situation, the Assamese have demanded that the central government create a "right of access" to Assam's natural resources, limited to those who can prove themselves to be "authentic" Assamese. Granting of special economic privileges to the Assamese, however, would certainly raise constitutional questions. Originally, under the Indian Constitution, every Indian had the same rights of citizenship regardless of the state or part of India in which he or she resided. Recent events and the rise in state parochialism, however, have subjugated this principle. Although the constitution provides freedom of movement to all Indians, this no longer means that a citizen will enjoy equal rights in every part of the country. The Indian Parliament recently barred Indian migrant settlers in Nagaland from running for elected positions in that state. The Meghalaya Legislative Assembly has adopted a residential permit bill that requires citizens from outside the state to obtain a permit if they reside in the state for more than four months. In West Bengal, the Assembly has passed a law stipulating that anyone living in the state for more than ten years will be treated as a "son of the soil," thus entitling him or her to preferential treatment in employment. Each of these examples refers to situations where state citizens are favored over nonstate citizens. If different ethnic group of Assam have fear for their future economic prosperity and cultural integrity, they could agitate together for political and economic restrictions against migrants to Assam from other parts of India. Such legislation probably would be constitutional, however, only if it was not ethnically biased and if it
applied equally to all Non residents of Assam. According to Robert G. Gosselink, “Any ethnic group must have certain resources before it can affirm itself as a group. This means that for a group's survival, the government must remove the conditions that lead to the group lacking the resources necessary for sustaining itself. In Assam, ethnic conflict will continue as long as the various communities do not have the rights and resources necessary to affirm their cultures and secure their survival.”

Economic nationalism constitutes an important element in the Bodo and Assamese separatist movements. The Assamese charge that India’s central government has exploited Assam of its oil and other rich resources without making corresponding investments. Economic grievances are often combined with charges of mistreatment. Tribal movement and violence in Assam also underline the importance of these grievances in the rise of ethnic protests. Excessive centralization and heavy-handed rule by central governments are usually behind the powerful surges of ethnic protests. A closer examination, however, suggests that centralization alone is rarely the sole reason for ethnic disaffection. In the context of Assam, constant demographic pressures can change the position of an ethnic group within Assam’s polity and a change in the distribution of power within an ethnic community, leading to conflict.

In the post-independent India, Assam was one of those states of North East which had to suffer from the development strategy of the Indian state. According to Ferdinand Banteilang Basan, “The North Eastern region is economically a backward region, though all the states have a lot of natural resources which, if properly tapped, will bring a huge boost to their economic development and improve the living standards of the people. But unfortunately because of the absence of large scale industries these raw materials cannot be manufactured within the region and hence it has just become only a major supplier of raw materials. Agriculture in the region is quite primitive, subsistence farming is mostly practised; hence the total output of agriculture is very low when compared with that of other states of India. All the

166 ibid
states in the region are not self sufficient in terms of agricultural produce and hence have to depend upon other parts of the country. The underdeveloped state of these two major sectors is a major cause to the economic underdevelopment of the Northeastern region. With the failure of these two sectors, employment generation has become a major problem in the region. With limited employment opportunities, ethnic groups gradually become very ethnic sensitive and very protective about their opportunities, resources and their land. There is an intense competition between groups who contend for the resources of the state. As a result ethnic groups become more aggressive and assertive in protecting their rights. The emergence of ethnic agent has strengthened this process of ethnic mobilization, by making people feel the need to demand exclusivity within their territorial dominance.”

Apart from this, some other factors such as geographical location of the state, political disturbances, perennial flood, under developed infra-structure and so on were also responsible for the slow transformation of economy in post-colonial Assam.

In a predominantly agricultural state like Assam, the peasants had played a very significant role for agricultural development of the land in different ages. The economy of Assam is always predominantly an agricultural economy. For the development of the state, the agricultural sector plays a vital role. But, unfortunately the agricultural production did not show any rapid progress in post-colonial Assam. The rapid growth of population, flood problems and slow process of modernisation of agricultural sectors were the factors responsible for low agricultural productivity in post-colonial Assam.

As far the industrial sector of Assam is concerned, tea, oil and plywood etc. were the major industry in Assam. In comparison to the resource and potential, the developments of all these sectors were also not much encouraging and significant. In post-colonial Assam, the tea industry emerged as a major industry along with oil and plywood. It was expected to play a leading role in transforming the economy of the state. Assam produced about 55 percent of total tea produced in India. There were 744 tea estates in 1961 which was increased upto 769 in 1979. The state produced

\[\text{Thesis Ferdinad Banteilang Basan, “Ethnic Identities and Issues of Development: A Case Study of Meghalaya”, Centre for Political Studies, JNU, New Delhi}\]


\[\text{ibid, p63}\]
180 million kg of tea in 1961 which was increased upto 283 million kg in 1979. But in spite of contributing towards the national economy, the tea industry of Assam remained neglected and there was no remarkable modernisation.\(^{171}\) The following estimate in table 1.G shows the development of tea industry in Assam.

### Table 1.G

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Head</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of Tea Estates</td>
<td>24720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area under tea (in thousand hectares)</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production of tea (in millions)</td>
<td>424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average yield per hectare in kg</td>
<td>1850</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Shah Bagichar Shramic Aru Aain by Dandeswar Saikia. People’s Book publication, 1978, p.8*

The oil sector of Assam also plays a decisive role in the progress of economy in post-colonial period. The production of oil has increased in post-colonial Assam. The production of crude oil and natural gas was 37.4 lakhs tons and 46.6 lakhs tons in the year of 1974 and 1979 respectively. It is to be noted that till 1977, Assam continued to produce half of the total crude oil produced in India. But there was no such important initiative taken by the government of India for the establishment of new refinery in Assam. After the agitation by the people of Assam, the central government decided to establish a small refinery at Noonmati, Guwahati. Earlier it was decided to establish the refinery at Barauni in Bihar to process the crude oil produced in Assam. This was a shocking and surprising decision taken by the government of India. It is this indifferent attitude of the government of India that stands as an obstacle towards the rapid development of oil sector in Assam.\(^{172}\) As a result the overall economic condition of Assam remained as underdeveloped and

\(^{171}\) *ibid*, p64  
\(^{172}\) *ibid*, p64
backward in comparison to the other regions of the country. Apart from attitude of
the government, there are the following constraints or impediments on the way of
rapid economic development in post-colonial Assam.

**Constant Growth of Population:**

Constant growth of population is one of the important factors for slow
economic development in post-colonial Assam. The demographic transformation
during the post-colonial period is a rapid transformation. The population of Assam
continued to increase in all the districts. The rate of decadal growth of population
was +19.9 percent in 1951. But it has increased tremendously up to +35.0 percent in
1961. Such growth rate was even higher than that of all India decadal growth rate
which was +13.3 percent and +21.5 percent in 1951 and 1961 respectively (See
Table 1.E & 1.F). The rapid growth of population put severe pressure on the
availability of land. As a result the productive capacity of land has been gradually
declined in post colonial Assam. The government has failed to provide the basic
needs and to create an atmosphere to explore the potentialities of human resources
because of this constant growth of population. Thus, the high growth rate of
population became a problem for economic development in Assam.

**Political Disturbances:**

In the post colonial period, the state of Assam has witnessed different
political turmoils such as the ethnic assertion, the language movement, the Assam
movement, the insurgent movement which made Assam as one of the disturbed
states of India. As a result, neither domestic nor foreign investors are interested to
any mega scale investment and projects in the post colonial period. Thus, these
factors are also responsible for the underdeveloped economy in post colonial Assam.

**Natural Calamities:**

The state of Assam has been severely affected by the different natural
calamities such as flood, erosion of river banks, drought and so on. Flood problem
has become one of the major problems of Assam’s economy. The calamities like
flood and erosion have caused enormous damages to the crops, live stock, land and
property. The flood problem not only destroyed the crops but also destroyed the
enthusiasm of the peasants to engage in agricultural activities. National Flood Commission estimated that the state of Assam has lost 3,86,476 hectares of land due to erosion which is around seven percent of total land area in the plain district of Assam.

**Unemployment Problem:**

Another important problem of Assam’s economy is unemployment. It has been estimated that upto October 2004 a total of 16.15 lakhs jobseekers have registered in the live register of employment exchange which included both technical and non-technical jobseekers. The numbers of unemployed youth are increasing day by day but the government has failed to provide job opportunities to them. As a result, the problem of unemployment is becoming more and more dangerous to the economy of the state. Apart from these factors, drainage of wealth, historical consequences, geographical location, poor infrastructure, slow process of modernisation, leadership crisis and political culture, slow pace of industrialisation are some other constraints or impediments on the way of rapid economic development in post-colonial Assam. In this backdrop the government has been implementing certain programmes and projects such as Prime Minister Rojgar Yojona (PMRY), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Sarva Siksha Abhijaan (SSA), National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and so on which brings a ray of hope towards socio-economic development of Assam. The formation of Self-Help Groups by the unemployed youths and their different productive activities, obviously contributes towards economic development in Assam. Therefore the government must encourage such emerging entrepreneurs’ groups by providing financial assistance along with ensuring proper market mechanism. Apart from this, the government should also strengthen the grassroot institutions in order to decentralise the process of development at the grassroot level.

**Summary:**

In this chapter, we have seen in historical context the nature and pattern of migration of different group of people to Assam from different parts of India. Historically, Assam has inherited a fractured society, divided along national and
ethnic lines. The growing competition for limited social and economic space has further intensified the hostilities and prejudices among the ethnic groups since the colonial period. There has been a constant attempt of looking at the issue of demographic change due to constant migration and how these immigrants destroyed the homogeneity of Assamese society. It also reveals the growing consciousness among the different cultural and linguistic ethnic groups who want to retain their tradition and relative pre-eminence while desiring to improve their socio-economic and political status during colonial and post colonial period. Various ethnic groups viewed the state government as an instrument to extend, consolidate or transform their position in the economy and social system. All these involved competition, conflict and power struggle. In this process of every ethnic group trying to protect its own interest, the region witnessed a number of conflicts between the state and ethnic groups as well as between groups themselves. It is in this backdrop, the next chapter will focus on the nature of ethnic conflicts in the state of Assam.