Chapter III: Nature of Ethnic Conflicts in Assam

One of the dominant features of the politics in Assam is the mobilisation of people on ethnic line. Ethnic identity and cultural emblems of the groups are used for socio-political and economic ends. Economic growth since 1947 has affected different ethnic groups differently in Assam. Some have gained, while others could not. The uneven economic development which generated a sense of being deprived resulted political mobilisation on ethnic line. The sense of relative deprivation among rival ethnic groups has frequently led to ethnic conflict. Therefore, ethnicity is the outward reaction of various socio-cultural groups against the existing politico-economic system in Assam. It culminates into ethno-political movements demanding autonomous state, autonomous council, district council, separate state and so on. To Quote Encyclopedia of India, “there is a correlation, though not a perfect fit, between ethnic “homeland” and ethnic identity. Possessing many of the features of a “nation,” ethnic communities seek cultural and political autonomy. This characteristic compelled Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to agree in 1955 to a linguistic reorganization of the Indian federation, creating linguistically discrete provinces. Ethnicity thus became the principle on which India would henceforth create new or merge existing state-provinces. Since then, India has added many new states to its union through internal reorganization. The creation of new states such as Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh are instances of the most recent efforts at appeasing ethnic demands. The extent of autonomy granted to state provinces on which the Constitution is ambivalent at best has been a persistent source of domestic tension. Frequently, the success of one ethnic group has triggered demands for parallel recognition by other ethnic groups within the same state-province.”

Ethnic conflict in the Northeastern region is result of modernization, uneven economic growth and party competition. There are nevertheless important differences among them. Assam and the Northeast were poorly integrated, first into the British Raj and later into independent India and were populated by many hill tribes that had a distinctive culture from that of the plains of Assam. The first tribes to break with Assam and to demand autonomy were the Nagas. Once the Nagas

were given a state, others with equally distinctive cultures and languages could no longer be denied. Between 1972 and 1987, the original province of Assam was divided into seven separate federal states. To quote Girin phukon, “Because of different separatist, sons of the soil movements which was started on ethnic line in 1960’s and 1970’s, a number of states such as Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram were carved out of Assam. The demand for the creation of more states and union territories still continues in Assam such as Bodoland, Karbi-Anglong and Barak Valley. Ethnicity has become a potential “Political Resource” of movement for reorganisation of Assam. Therefore, ethnicity has also become a cause of ethnic conflicts among different ethnic groups in Assam.”

Tiplut Nongbri, Sanjib Baruah and Walter Fernandes have traced the rise of ethnicity as a social and political force in the northeast in general and Assam in particular with the coming of British Colonialism. Therefore, in the previous chapter we have examined how British colonialism as well as the emergence of the Indian state has been responsible for encouraging the emergence of ethnicity and identity formation in the region. In this chapter it is proposed to examine nature and genesis of ethnic conflicts in different parts of Assam.

During the colonial period, the British successfully utilised the then geopolitical situation and multi-ethnic character of the North-East to the convenience of colonial administration. In fact, they grouped and regrouped the territories and the people in order to suit their interest. The colonial rulers gradually brought the neighbouring hills areas within the administrative jurisdiction of Assam. For instance Assam’s Plains in 1826, Cachar Plains in 1830, Khasi Hills in 1833, Jaintia Hills in 1835, Karbi-Anglong (Mikir Hills) in 1838, North Cachar Hills in 1854, Naga Hills during 1866-1904, Garo Hills in 1872-73, Lusai Hills in 1890 and North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, now called Arunachal Pradesh) in 1911. During the colonial period, the Hills people had very little opportunity to mix up with the

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people of the plains. The “Emotional Integration” of the hills with the people of the plains remained a distant dream.\textsuperscript{178} This was so, because several laws were introduced by the British to keep the Hills tribal’s aloof. The Schedule Districts Act (Act XVI) of 1874 passed on 8\textsuperscript{th} December, 1874 is an example. Through this act the whole Chief Commissionership of Assam was declared as a scheduled district of “Backward Tracts”.\textsuperscript{179} In 1880, the Assam Frontier Tracts Regulation (Regulation 2) was issued by the colonial government and removed certain Frontier Tracts’ of Assam, which were inhabited by semi-civilised tribes.\textsuperscript{180} To keep the tribals of hills aloof from the plains people, the colonial ruler introduced The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873 through which the government prescribed an “Inner Line” permit to restrict the entry of the non-tribal or plains people in the hills areas.\textsuperscript{181} Introduction of Inner Line system was the result of “divide and rule’ policy of colonial government but according to Mackenzie it was “for the purpose of administrative jurisdiction and did not decide the sovereignty beyond”.\textsuperscript{182}

One of the significant developments, regarding the segregation of the tribal people took place in 1919 when the Government of India Act 1919 inserted section 52A with the recommendation of Montague-Chelmsford. According to this section Governor General in council may declare any territory to be a backward tract and may pass any legislative act in the areas. Accordingly, under section 52A (2) of the act, the following territories were declared as backward tracts.\textsuperscript{183}

(I) The Garo Hills District.
(II) The British Portion of Khasi and Jaintia Hills District.
(III) The Mikir Hills (in Nowgong and Sibsagar District).
(IV) The North Cachar Hills. (in Cachar District)
(V) The Naga Hills District.
(VI) The Lusai Hills District.
(VII) The Sadia Frontier Tract.
(VIII) The Balipara Frontier Tract and

\textsuperscript{178} J. Borah, “Demand for Reorganisation: A Failure of National Party System”, eds, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1996, p 64
\textsuperscript{180} S.K Chaube, “Hills Politics in Northeast India”, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1999, p18
\textsuperscript{181} N. Konwar, “Society and Politics in Assam”, Book Land, Panbazar, Guwahati,2006,p82
\textsuperscript{182} S.K Chaube, “Hills Politics in Northeast India”, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1999, p15
\textsuperscript{183} N. Konwar, “Society and Politics in Assam”, Book Land, Panbazar, Guwahati,2006,p82
(IX) The Lakhimpur Frontier Tract.

However, the Government of India Act 1935 renamed the term backward areas and now these were administered under two categories namely “Excluded Areas” and “Partially Excluded Areas”. The Government of India (Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas) order 1936 included the following areas as excluded areas.

(I) The Naga Hills District.
(II) The Lusai Hills District.
(III) The North Cachar Subdivision of the Cachar District and
(IV) The Frontier Tracts (Sadia, Balipara and Lakhimpur).

On the other hand following areas are included as partially excluded areas

(I) The Garo Hills District.
(II) The Khasi and Jaintia Hills District (excluding Shillong).
(III) The Mikir Hills Tracts of Nowgong and Sibsagar Districts.

Thus, the political demarcation and separate system of administration in the hills had always been a factor of ethnic division and differences between the hills people and plains people. Therefore, in the post independent period, suspicion and fear grew up in the minds of hills people that the people of the plains taking the help of the state power would exploit them. And such fears and anxieties among rival ethnic groups have frequently led to ethnic conflict in Assam in post-independent era.

Again, after independence the Assamese middle class elite became increasingly assertive of their socio-cultural and linguistic rights. The aspiration of the ethnic Assamese to make Assam a “nation province” of the Assamese did grow up. Therefore, the Assam Official Language Bill of 1960 was introduced by the government of Assam to give Assamese language its rightful place. In this regard the then Member of Legislative Assembly, Nilamoni Phukon said, “All the languages of different communities and their culture will be absorbed in Assamese

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184 Girin Phukon, “Ethnicity, Politics of Language and Reorganisation of States in North-East India”, eds, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1996, p 50
culture. I speak with rather authority in this matter regarding the mind of our people that this state government cannot nourished any other language in the province. When all state affairs will be conducted in Assamese, it will stand in good stead for hill people to transact their business in Assamese with their Assamese brethren.”

As soon as the Bill was introduced in the state legislative assembly of Assam different ethnic groups including Bengali both in the hills and plains vehemently opposed this proposed Language Bill. They stated that it would deprive them from their share of government jobs unless they knew the “Assamese” well. In fact, the emerging tribal ethnic middle class and Bengali middle class both in the hills and plains felt terribly insecure of their interest within greater Assam. This was reflected from the speech of hill tribe leader Captain Williamson Sangma. While debating on Official Language Bill, Sangma said, “It is already known to the people of the entire state that we, hill people, are vehemently opposed to the introduction of the Bill. We are opposed to declaring Assamese as the official language of the state. However, our stand is considered to be not justified. As you personally know Sir, ever since 1918 when the move for declaring Assamese as the state language the hill leaders including myself expressed our strong opposition to the proposal. Even since that time the hill leader’s mode is very clear that they were not prepared to accept Assamese as the state language of Assam. It was not because we disliked Assamese or we had ill feeling against our Assamese brothers and sisters. But we considered that by accepting Assamese as the official language we shall be handicapped.”

But, keeping in mind the developments of other parts of the country and also the ‘emotions’ of the Assamese people, the then Chief Minister of Assam Bimala Prasad Chaliha introduced the State Official Language Bill in the state legislature and said, “During the last few years several states in India have decided upon their respective official language and therefore this question naturally has assumed some urgency and importance in Assam also.........Meanwhile public opinion grew in intensity and volume and the matter was again raised in all seriousness in the last Budget session of the Assembly. Therefore, in the situation prevailing in the state today is no longer desirable to postpone a decision on this question. Emotions have been

188 ibid
raised and sentiments played up and the state has passed through some unfortunate
and tragic happenings.”

As a result a state-wide reaction was noticed, particularly by the Bengali
community. As a protest against the Assam Official Language Bill, the Nikhil
Assam Banga Bhasa Samiti had submitted a memorandum to the president of India
demanding to introduce Bengali for all official purposes throughout the state. The
Bengali speaking people were so dissented that they started movement, particularly
under the guidance of Sangram Parishad and Bhasa Andolan Samiti. There were
violent conflicts between the ethnic Assamese and the Hindu Bengalis. People died
from both sides as a result of inter-ethnic conflicts as well as of police firing to
control protest demonstrations and riots. Those who were killed became martyrs and
adding to the emotions on both sides to be used to mobilise on the language
question. For instance, Ranjit Barpujari, an ethnic Assamese student, who was killed
by police firing during the language riots of 1960, is honoured as the “first martyr of
the mother tongue.” On the Bengali sides, for instance, Paritosh Pal Choudhury’s
book Cacharer Kanna (Cry of Cachar) has a front-page with pictures of eleven
garlanded dead bodies of people killed in 1961 as a result of police firing on a
demonstration in support of Bengali language in Silchar. As the situation was
deteriorated because of the inter-ethnic conflicts between the ethnic Assamese and
the Hindu Bengalis, the central level leader of the Congress party had to intervene
on the issue. As a result, the then Home Minister Lal Bahadue Shastri came out with
a formula which is popularly known as “Shastri Formula”. Shastri proposed that
the Assam Official Language Act be amended- (a) to give local bodies the authority
to alter the official language of their area by a two thirds majority (b) to allow
communication between the state capital and Cachar and the hill districts in English
(c) at the state level to continue the use of English along with Assamese and (d) to
incorporate stronger provisions for the protection of linguistic minorities. Despite
some opposition, the law was amended along those lines. The basic objective of

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190 ibid, p.74
191 ibid, p. 74
192 Sanjib Baruah, “India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality”, Oxford University Press, New
Delhi 2001, p.105
194 Sanjib Baruah, “India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality”, Oxford University Press, New
Delhi 2001, p105
Shastri formula was to find out a solution to the ethnic conflict between the ethnic Assamese and Hindu Bengalis in Assam by making the official language Act somewhat flexible and by giving opportunity to the linguistic minority.\(^{195}\)

It also needs to be noted that the hills tribes such as Khasi, Garo, Mizo, Karbi etc who have been maintaining their lingo-cultural identity were also not willing to accept “Assamese” as Official Language for the state of Assam. Thus, in this regard Captain Williamson A Sangma, participating in the vote of thanks on the Governor’s address on language bill said, “When the language bill was proposed to be introduced in the House the hills people belonging to different political parties met in a number of conference and thereafter informed the governor that they were not prepared to accept Assamese as the official language of Assam. In spite of this protest the government decided to adopt the Bill. After the enactment of this act all those who previously did not favour separation of Assam, now support separation of hills from Assam.”\(^{196}\) In this regard Sanjib Baruah observed that the passing of the Assam Official Language Act in 1960 raised fears and suspicions in the minds of the different hill tribes and accelerated tribal separation from Assam. The Act specified Assamese as the official language and the medium of instruction in schools throughout Assam. In the mountainous regions where Assamese was not the native language, this chauvinistic move on the part of the Assamese-dominated provincial legislature was met with great opposition. Fearing that Assamese linguistic expansion would eventually lead to the elimination of their own cultural identity, the tribal groups increased their agitation for the creation of new states within Assam wherein they could practice self-determination of language and culture. As tribal riots and violence escalated during the 1960s, the central government finally intervened and Assam underwent a process of phased vivisection. One by one, the government removes the tribal areas from the existing body of Assam and constituted them as Separate States and Union Territories.\(^{197}\) When the then Chief Minister of Assam Bimala Prasad Chaliha sought permission of the Speaker to

\(^{195}\) N. Konwar, “Society and Politics in Assam”, Book Land, Panbazar, Guwahati,2006,p74

\(^{196}\) Balin Hazarika, “Students’ Instrumentality in Reorganisation of India’s North-East”, eds, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1996, p 75

introduce the Language Bill, 1960, another hill tribe leader A Thanglura, the Chairman of the Council of Action of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) also expressed his discontent in the House and said, “now the Assamese brethren are speaking about their apprehension that they might be wiped off by the Bengali. If the Assamese people who are quite advanced and who have got facilities and security, think about such apprehension, than what about the tribes who have less security and facility. At least in the constitution, there is provision for the Assamese language, but so far as the Tribals are concerned there is no such provision. There is no security for their language like the Assamese language. ...............Personally I am not fascinated with the terms of separation. But if the aspiration of the Assamese people cannot be stopped we shall move for separation. We shall march towards our promised land where Assamese shall have nothing to do there.”

Because of the declaration of Assamese as official language, different tribal groups of Assam develop an apprehension that their cultural identity and language is going to be eliminated and submerged. It gave a serious jolt to the process of unity and integrity among the people of Assam which was initiated by Gopinath Bordoloi and his contemporary. The people particularly from hills areas and from Cachar could not absorb the declaration of Assamese as official language. Therefore, the leaders of hill tribes formed All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) and demanded for the creation of separate hill state. To quote Ferdinand Banteilang Basan, “After most tribal states have been incorporated into the Indian union through the various decrees, the Assamese just like the nationalist leaders believed that the divide and rule policy of the colonial rulers which has segregated the people of the hills from those of the plains was now over With the British Colonialist gone, a chance of unifying both the people from the hills and from those of the plains has arisen. So immediately after India achieved independence, the Assamese politicians sought to hasten the process of Assamization or extension of Assamese influence in the neighbouring hills by introducing Assamese language as a compulsory language in the hill areas. However, this was faced with strong resentment from the hill people. The constant

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harping of assimilation and ‘Greater Assam’ alarmed the hill people of losing their culture, language and even their main prop namely land. They gradually developed a fear of being exploited and outnumbered by their neighbours in the plains. Administrative exclusion, enlightenment and the pressure of assimilation to a Greater Assam by the Assamese alarmed and strengthened ethnic identities in the hill areas. These factors enable ethnic groups to use ethnicity as a rationale to make demands especially in the political arena i.e. demanding a major say for the group in the political system, control over a piece of territory within the territory and increasing their share of scarce resources. Hence, after much negotiation, demands and protest from the hill people, it became inevitable that the then Greater Assam would be fragmented and several hill states would be created more on the basis of ethnic identity than on linguistic set up”.

On the other hand in this regard scholars like Nani Gopal Mahanta stated that ‘…the view of Apurba Barua who is extremely critical of the narrow, parochial, inward looking attitude of the tribal and ethnic communities of Assam. Commenting on what he considers the anti-Asomiya stand of the tribal leaders Barua argues that it is wrong to think that the Asomiya elite alone is responsible for the present inward looking politics and argues for the delimitation of the indigenous peoples of Assam. It is in this context that the demands of the various communities in Assam for constitutional protection should be discussed. It must be kept in mind that any policy that seeks to protect the interests of the ethnic communities per se will lead to a proliferation of such identities and would further divide the society, because it sends the signal that ethnic identity is a useful political platform. Today there seems to be no end to this process of fragmentation. While the existing identities as of now will have to be recognized, fragmentation will have to be halted in the interest of political integration. Or we may soon be in a situation of facing demands for village republics. That need not be a healthy development. He further argues: The exclusive rights claimed by the ethnic identities on the basis of indigenous status are also problematic because no community can conclusively prove that they are the original inhabitants of an area. They can merely claim. The original settlements in most parts of the globe are matters of very early period of human history. The evidence about that period is

rather insufficient and definitely not verifiable. It is therefore more realistic to talk in terms of permanent residents than in terms of indigenous people.”

Assam had to witness another inter-ethnic conflict between the ethnic Assamese and Hindu Bengalis in 1970’s because of the movement for Medium of Instruction. In the early seventies dominant section of the Assamese middle class, wanted to make “Assamese” as the sole medium of instruction in the state as a measure of protecting their lingo-cultural interest on a sound footing. The movement to introduce Assamese as the sole medium of instruction in the state was led by All Assam Students’ Union (AASU). Therefore, both the Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University decided to introduce Assamese as the medium of collegiate education in all colleges under its jurisdiction with effect from the academic year 1972-73 with some exception. This decision of Gauhati University created discontent among the Bengalis, who demanded Bengali should also be declared as a medium of instruction in all colleges under its jurisdiction. Keeping in mind the increasing demands of the Bengali speaking people, the Academic Council of Gauhati University came out with a ‘Circular’ according to which-

(i) English was to be retained as the medium of instruction for a period of time, and 
(ii) Students would be permitted to answer their examination questions in Assamese, English and Bengali.

The decision of the academic council to permit the students to answer in Bengali had provoked the Assamese speaking people and they started agitation. Under such an agitational pressure the academic council had to review its decision. Accordingly the Academic Council came out with its revised decision on 12 June 1972, which included following aspects-

i) Assamese shall be the medium of instruction in all colleges under the jurisdiction of Gauhati University.

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ii) English will continue as an alternative medium of instruction till such time not exceeding ten years as may be considered necessary by the Academic Council.

iii) Students shall have the option to answer either in Assamese and English in University Examination.

iv) The above decision shall came into force with effect from the session 1972-73 in respect of two years, pre-university course from the session 1974-75 in respect of two-years degree course.

The revised circular, again, created discontent among the Bengali speaking population of Assam. Again, there were violent conflicts between the ethnic Assamese and the Hindu Bengalis causing death. An Assamese student leader named Atul Bora was murdered during the violence of 1972 and he is honoured as a martyr of medium movement of Assam. The introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction reinforced the demand for separate state/union territory in Cachar. In this regard S. Barua stated that “Indeed, the language issue appears to have been utilized as a pawn in the game of power politics in Assam and it is unlikely that the conflict of local political interests will permit it to be judged on its own merits. A new political phenomenon of this period was the localized opportunism of the CPI which vociferously put forward the proposal for political separation of Cachar. This was voiced also by Bengali organization of Cachar. Neither political experience nor a theoretical and programmatic formulation can be shown to justify Communist Party of India’s (CPI) change in policy. Sandhya Barua observes “It has nothing in common with the democratic right to self determination. The right of nations to self determination implies exclusively the right to independence in the political sense, the right to free political separation from the oppressor nation.” The oppression of Bengalis in Cachar is far from being real and the autonomy given to the Bengali language in the literary sphere is a clear indication of this fact.” Besides, the other ethnic groups who contributed greatly to the Assamese nation building process such as the Bodo, the Karbi, the Dimasa,

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204 Sanjib Baruah, “India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality”, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2001, p105
205 Sandhya Barua, “Language Problem in Assam” Social Scientist, Vol. 6, No. 12 (Jul., 1978), Published by: Social Scientist, pp. 66-74
206 ibid
the Misings, the Tiwa, the Deori etc were also not happy to accept Assamese as the medium of instruction in Assam. As a result, they started different movement and demanded for the preservation of their own language and culture which they thought as the symbol of identification of their respective communities. Thus, the goal of making Assam a nation-province for the Assamese, introducing Assamese as the Official Language in Assam and Assamese as the medium of instruction in colleges and universities by the ethnic Assamese in post colonial multi-ethnic Assam had intensified the inter-ethnic rivalries to such an extent that reorganization of the province had been considered to be the best option by the Indian state. Naga Hills were taken out much earlier in 1963 to form the province of Nagaland and under the 1972 reorganization plan, Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills were taken out to form Meghalaya and Lusai hills were made the province of Mizoram. Though the reorganization in 1972 has reduced the diversity of ethnic cleavages and the demographic heterogeneity and rendered the ethnic Assamese as the single largest community in Assam, but their aspirations to make Assam a nation-province of the Assamese remained unfulfilled. In the present context question may arises here, what should be the nature of inter-relations between different linguistic groups in Assam? The unhesitating answer is that, there should be a relation of equality and friendly co-operation and certainly not that of the predominance of one or few languages over others. Only on this basis, it would be possible for the people speaking different languages which are now underdeveloped to carry forward their distinctive cultural heritage on the one hand and to absorb progressive ideas on the other.209

In the post-reorganized Assam, a new dimension came into sharp focus and that is the steady ingress (opening) of the Muslims into the political power structures and now it is viewed as the principal threat to the political security of the ethnic Assamese in the State. Relatively better economic opportunities have encouraged

207 Girin Phukon, “Ethnicity, Politics of Language and Reorganisation of States in North-East India”, eds, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1996, p 56
208 Internate Source: www.nits.ac.in/department/Humanities/social.doc, Gurudas Das, “Identity and Underdevelopment: On Conflict and Peace in Assam”
mass migration from Bangladesh into India, particularly into the bordering state of Assam. After India's partition in 1947, the Indian and Pakistani governments established a two-year "grace period" during which Hindus in Pakistan could settle in India and Muslims in India could immigrate to Pakistan. Pakistanis who migrated to India during the grace period automatically became Indian citizens. After July 26, 1949, however, immigration was possible only by completing certain legal procedures (visa applications, for example) and unrestricted cross-border migration should have ceased. This was not the result. Even after the existence of an international boundary, the imposition of a variety of legal restrictions and the presence of an Assamese government, [all failed to] stem the flow of Bengali Muslims into Assam.\textsuperscript{210} The native Assamese have mobilized in protest against the new migrants. They accused the central government of deliberately ignoring the cause of Assam. Assamese leaders charge that India’s central government, largely dominated by the Congress Party, sought the migrant vote and, therefore, ignored the Assamese demands.\textsuperscript{211} As a result, in the late 1970’s and in the mid 1980’s, a large–scale movement was led by a student organization and some political parties, namely, All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) in Assam which is known as Assam Movement or the movement against the foreign nationals. In this regard Robert G. Gosselink stated that When the Assamese "movement against foreigners" was launched, it was labeled variously as secessionist, anti-Muslim, and anti-Bengali. The Assamese involved in the movement have long denied these characterizations. They insist that their struggle to "protect" Assam from non-Indians. It is not a religious, ethnic, or separatist movement. Rather, it is a national movement against the continued presence of foreigners in Assam and is designed to succeed where both the Indian government and the Indian Constitution have failed. Indeed, there are millions of illegal Nepalese and Bengali immigrants in Assam and the Indian government has failed in its duty to prevent this illegal migration. Nevertheless, it is also true that the Assamese have been agitating not only to expel foreigners, but also to protect the Assamese language and culture and preserve Assamese dominance in the state's


\textsuperscript{211} Internet source: “Encyclopedia of India”, Vol.2 (E-J), Thomson Corporations, United States of America, 2006, p39-44
political arena. It would be oversimplifying the issue to characterize the conflict in Assam solely as a matter of Indians versus non-Indians. A more honest approach recognizes that the growing non-Assamese groups in the state genuinely threaten the Assamese identity with extinction and that the purpose of the movement is to stop this threat. According to Subir Bhaumik, “the breakup of Assam not only produced fresh demands for ethnic homelands within what remained of it, but it also drove a section of the ethnic Assamese to insurgency. With the hills gone, the Assamese turned to their valleys to find they were fast becoming a minority there because of migration. The anti-foreigner movement rocked Assam between 1979 and 1985 and led to large-scale, free-for all types of ethnic riots. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), now the leading separatist organization in Assam, was born out of this movement. Its initial credo was ethnic cleansing—it sought by the force of arms to drive the “foreigners” out of Assam.”

The by election of the Mongaldoi parliamentary constituency in Assam in 1978 focused fresh public attention on Assam’s problem of illegal immigration. The leaders of All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) argued that the unusual rise in the electoral roll prepared for the by-election of Mongaldoi parliamentary constituency was caused by the influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. They demanded the detection of the names of foreigners on the electoral rolls, the deletion of those names and the deportation of foreigners from Assam. To find out the solution of the problem of illegal immigration several round of talks were held between the government of India and the leaders of the movement in December 1982 and early January 1983 but no solution could be found out.

After the failure of the talk between the government of India and the leaders of the movement in December 1982 and early January 1983, the government of India decided to conduct State Legislatively Assembly election in February 1983 in

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213 Internet Source: www.apcss.org/PagesfromReligiousRadicalism, Subir Bhaumik, “Ethnicity, Ideology and Religion: Separatist Movements in India’s northeast
Assam. But the leadership of the movement was against it and they were determined to stop the election at any cost which created an extremely explosive situation in Assam.\textsuperscript{216} The leaders of the movement called it Assam’s last struggle for survival and campaign in different part of Assam. On the other hand, the descendents of Muslim immigrants, who regarded the movement anti-Muslim, saw the election as a good opportunity to elect an immigrant-friendly government.\textsuperscript{217} As a result, there were a series of inter-ethnic conflict just before and after the election in Assam. To quote Manirul Hussain, “When the Assam movement and the Indian state came into confrontation on the issue of holding elections to the state legislature in early 1983, various social and ethnic groups and political parties were sharply divided over the participation in the elections and the leaders of the movement decided to oppose it at any cost. On the contrary, the government was determined to go ahead with the elections despite knowing the consequences and the human cost involved therein. Both the declaration of and the opposition to elections propelled an unprecedented terrorisation process in the Brahmaputra Valley.”\textsuperscript{218} There was a conflict between the Bodos and ethnic Assamese on 13\textsuperscript{th} February, 1983 in Gohpur, Darrang district of Assam. It took place because the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), an organisation demanding an autonomous state for plain tribes of Assam decided to contest the election and the Bodos supported it. As a result, there was a conflict between the Bodo election supporters and the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) workers. Almost, at the same time, inter-ethnic conflict took place between immigrants Bengali Muslim and ethnic Assamese people in char areas (Riverrine areas) of south of Mongaldoi district. It was estimated that more than a hundred people died in that conflict.\textsuperscript{219} On 18\textsuperscript{th} February 1983 over 1200 hundred Bengali Muslims died in inter-ethnic conflict between the Bengali Muslims and Tiwas, a plain tribal group of Assam at Nellie about 70 Km east of Guwahati in Nagaon district. This incident also known as Nellie massacres of 1983. It is to be noted that the ethnic Assamese also supported

\textsuperscript{216} Manirul Hussain, \textit{“The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity”}, Manak Publications Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, p 141
\textsuperscript{217} Sanjib Baruah, \textit{“India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality”}, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2001, p131
the Tiwas during the time of conflict.\footnote{Manirul Hussain, “The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity”, Manak Publications Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, p 141} There are several factors responsible for this inter-ethnic conflict between the Bengali Muslims and Tiwas, including ethnic Assamese. One important factor responsible for the conflict is the land alienation problem, suffered by the tribal people and ethnic Assamese in the hands of the Muslim of East-Bengal origin. The leaders of the Assam movement emphasized the issue of tribal land alienation as a problem caused by the influx of foreigners, the Bengali Muslims. Another factor responsible for this inter-ethnic conflict between the Bengali Muslims and Tiwas, including ethnic Assamese is that it was instigated by leaders of the movement. Apart from that the other Hindu organisation such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) instigated the local people to target the Muslims.\footnote{Makiko Kimura, “Agency of Rioters: A Study of Decision-Making in the Nellie Massacre, Assam, 1983”, eds, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2009, p195} The Nellie massacre was followed by another massacre at Chaulkhowachapor in Darrang district. Again, the victims belonged to the same ethnic group. Another massacre took place at Silapather in Lakhimpur district where the victims were Hindu Bengalis. These inter-ethnic conflicts not only killed hundreds of people but also led to the destruction of property worth crores of rupees.\footnote{Manirul Hussain, “The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity”, Manak Publications Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, p 142} Later on this conflict has reemerged in violent form under the leadership of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). To quote Robert G. Gosselink, “cultural differences, communal separatism and competition among ethnic groups for jobs, social status and political power nonetheless have resulted in bitter and violent struggles. In Assam, these conflicts are compounded by immigration problems and demographic changes, which have pitted indigenous Assamese against migrant Bengalis, Hindus against Muslims and Assam against India's central government. In 1983, this ethnic tension erupted into violence that led to the deaths of over seven thousand persons in less than a fortnight.”\footnote{Robert G. Gosselink, “Minority Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Assam, India,” Boston College of Third world Law journal, Volume 14, Issue 1, 1994 p 1-35} In recent time, the governor of Assam, Lt Gen S K Sinha also took certain initiatives that won the appreciation of the Assamese elite. On November 8, 1998, he sent a 42-page report to the home minister, wherein he mentioned that illegal infiltration into
Assam had changed the demographic pattern of the state and posed a grave threat to both the identity of the Assamese people as well as the security of the nation. He expressed the fear that the large-scale influx of Bangladeshi nationals may lead to the demand for the merger of certain areas of Assam with Bangladesh. He recommended repeal of Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act (IMDT) and sought a practical and expeditious approach to detecting illegal immigrants and declaring them stateless citizens without voting rights and without right to acquire movable property. M Amarjit Singh stated that, “for instance, the then Governor of Assam, S.K. Sinha drafted a report on illegal migration into Assam. The said report provoked Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi into labelling it as “a worthless document based on hearsay rather than facts … We would have examined the report had it contained facts.” Further, Gogoi told the press in Guwahati: “I had not given any importance to the report submitted to the centre [Government of India] by the previous Governor, SK Sinha, on the issue of infiltration and I am not according any importance to this report too.” He alleged that the report is creating confusion among the people. Tarun Gogoi also accused the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) for allegedly fuelling the ‘oust-Bangladeshi’ campaign and creating a communal divide. They are trying to create a Godhra-like situation in the state, but we will not allow this to happen in the land of Srimanta Sankardev and Ajan Fakir,”224 Although the report appeared as an impartial assessment of the ground reality, its communal character became evident when the governor, like a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) member, pointed his finger only at Muslim immigrants and blamed political parties of appeasing the Muslims for electoral gains. The report was welcomed by organisations like All Assam Students Union (AASU), which have been advocating stern action against illegal immigrants.225 In this regard Lucy Zehol stated that “a large number of foreigners those who have been living in Assam should be deported to their country of origin. Public opinion is often in favour of deportation as a quick solution, but this is a conceptual error as well as an unworkable policy, particularly in the case of Assam and Bangladesh. The first reason is that Bangladesh is a neighbouring country. The

Government may perhaps be able to forcefully deport people from far-off places back to their home but not to one’s neighbour with whom one shares 4,096.7 kilometers of border and with whom one needs to have good relations particularly in a globalizing context. The relationship between India and Bangladesh is likewise close, as this border area was an integrated market in pre-independence days and “a symbol of traditional pattern of economic exchange and long socio-cultural intercourse.” The second major reason is that, given the extremely high population density of Bangladesh and the relatively low density in Assam, a balancing out of the population seems to be unavoidable. Immigration will have to become an inseparable part of development programmes in Assam. However, there has been an insider-outsider issue around immigration. The feeling of hostility to those who are “not like us or not from where we are from” is only natural. In this light, the North Easterners may be a little cruder, while in other cultures the notion that the immigrants are ‘tribal’ people and are ‘savages’ automatically gave rise to a superiority complex towards the outsiders. The original inhabitants felt that they refused to learn the local ways and manners as they practised their ‘outside’ habits which are seen as a nuisance. So attempts are made to get rid of them. The important question should not be if, but how to handle this growing challenge for the common good including the good of those immigrants already living for decades in Assam.”

Thus, it is evident that during the past several decades; the issue of illegal migration had acquired a distinction of being a highly politicised issue in Assam. Different political formations across several states have been taking up the issue differently to suit their political ends and hence there is no political consensus on this issue. For instance, in Assam, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) have been accusing the Congress (I) for encouraging cross-border migration to build up its vote banks. On its part, the Congress (I) has accused Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for communalising the issue. Even as each side seeks to score ‘political goals’, the central issue continues to be sidelined. Differences also often heard at the highest level of the state government.

The Bodo-Santhal Conflict:

The state has also witnessed ethnic clash between Bodo and Santhals in early 1996. The Bodo-Santhal conflict took place in April, 1996 after the killing of three Bodo ladies in Satyapur under Gouma Forest, one of the Santhal localities of Gossaigaon sub-division. Even though it was not certain about who killed those three Bodo ladies, it was taken for granted that Santhals have killed them because the three dead bodies were found in the Santhal localities. Consequently, thousands of Bodo youth who gathered to see the dead bodies of three Bodo ladies started beating few Santhals in Gossaigaon area itself. As a reaction to this attack, the Santhals fought back with bows and arrows and burnt some of the Bodo villages and killed a few Bodos. On the other hand the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), a Bodo militant outfit, took this opportunity to show their patriotism towards Bodos and started burning down the Santhal villages and killed many Santhals. The Bodo–Santhal ethnic conflict displaced about 42,214 families consisting of about 2,02,684 persons from their homes. This ethnic conflict displaced about one fourth of the district’s population.

Bodo is one of the largest plain tribe groups in Assam. According to the Language table of the Census of India, 1991, their population is somewhere between 12.21 lakhs. They are distributed mostly in the northern bank of Brahmaputra and scattered in southern bank of Brahmaputra, adjoining states and found in few pockets in Nepal and Bangladesh. They speak Tibeto-Burman Bodo language and recently this language have been recognized as one of the official languages and included in the eight schedule of the constitution of India. They follow mainly three religions – Bathow, Brahma and Christianity.

On the other hand, Santhals along with other tea tribe communities like Oraon, Munda, Khamer etc, brought by the tea planters to Assam during nineteenth century. Though they were brought only to work in tea garden, in later period, they started settling in and around the tea garden and slowly crept into far off places.

Internet Source: Pralip Kumar Narzary, “Hidden Truth of Ethnic Clash Between Boro Tribe and Santhals in Assam”, Post Graduate Department of Population Studies, Fakir Mohan University, Vyasa Vihar, Balasore 19, Orissa, India

ibid
Today their population is not less than 30 lakhs. The ethnic conflict was only with Santhals who are outside tea garden and had nothing to do with other tea tribe groups who constitute almost the entire labour force of the tea garden till today.\textsuperscript{230}

At the first instance, the conflict between the Bodos and Santhals seems to be an attempt by the Bodos to create a separate state of Bodoland through ‘ethnic cleansing’. But the hidden truth is something different. A number of factors are responsible for this inter-ethnic conflict. These are:

First, one of the possible factors of this conflict was the role of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and their decision to ban the Santhals entry into the forests in the lower Assam. The Santhals who are closely associated with the forest for their survival were dissatisfied and got frustrated with National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), but they could not directly oppose the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). This made Santhals to develop hatred towards National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and Bodos in general and they started preparing for fighting against Bodos. This was well harnessed by other anti social elements.\textsuperscript{231}

Second factor is perhaps the government intention to weaken the separate movement by creating a rift between Bodo and Santhal who have been living in this particular area since long time. The government stroked the iron when it was hot. It took the advantage of Santhal’s aspiration to chase Bodos and it worked out well.

Third factor is that even though it was not certain about who killed those three Bodo ladies, but it was taken for granted that Santhals have killed them. This killing, however, could be due to personnel motives or conspiracy of third party and it was the responsibility of government to find out the culprits. But, the laxity on the part of the government allowed the conflict to spread in other parts of Kokrajhar district of Assam. A proper investigation of that killing could really throw some light on the actual cause of the conflict between Bodos and Santhals.\textsuperscript{232}

\textit{The Karbi-Kuki Conflict:}

Militant groups clashing among themselves for control over the public resources even at the cost of the rights of the local tribal or ethnic community is an important factor behind persistent inter-ethnic conflicts in Karbi-Anglong district of

\textsuperscript{230} ibid
\textsuperscript{231} ibid
\textsuperscript{232} ibid
Assam. A study of the conflicts between Karbi and Kuki tribal groups in Karbi-Anglong district from October 2003 to March 2004 supports this point. The involvement of militant groups in inter-ethnic conflict between Karbi-Kuki led to high civilian casualties. The casualty includes at least 23 Kukis and 54 Karbis.²³³

Before going deeper into the whole episode, some facts need to be kept in mind. There are two different groups of Kuki in Karbi-Anglong district of Assam namely ‘Old Kuki’ and ‘New Kuki’. One group that inhabits the Hamren subdivision area of the district is indigenous to Karbi Anglong. They are fully integrated with the local population in all respects. Therefore, anthropologists call them ‘Old Kuki’, whereas for the Karbis they are ‘Nochans’. The present conflict has nothing to do with the ‘Old Kuki’, who have a population of around four to five thousand and are confined only to a small pocket in Hamren subdivision of Karbi-Anglong district. The other group which is known as New Kuki is involved in the present conflict with the Karbi. This group has migrated from the neighboring states of Nagaland and Manipur during the last two decades. The population of the ‘New Kuki’ is around thirty five thousand and they have settled mostly in Singhason-Khonbamon Hill range of Diphu subdivision. Prior to this migration, there were no Kuki villages in Diphu subdivision, except a few Kuki hamlets bordering Dimapur sector of Nagaland.²³⁴

It is thus natural to raise the question why did the Kuki migrate from the neighboring states of Nagaland and Manipur? The inter-ethnic conflict which was started in Nagaland during the 1980s, had compelled the Kuki to leave that state. While one section crossed over to Manipur, the other section came to Karbi Anglong, considering these to be more secure place. But, later on Manipur also became unsafe to the kukis because of inter-tribal conflicts such as Kuki-Naga, Kuki-Paite and so on. Therefore, ferom Manipur too Kukis started to migrate to Karbi-Anglong.²³⁵

The migrant Kuki would also have integrated with the socio-political as well as cultural milieu of Karbi-Anglong, as was the case with other ethnic groups like Dimasa, Rengma Nagas, Tiwas, Man-Tais, Garos, Tea-tribes, etc., who have been maintaining a cordial and vibrant relationship with the Karbis since ages. But, this

²³³ Internet Source: www. Karbi Information Network. com
²³⁴ ibid
²³⁵ ibid
did not happen. It was mainly because of the breakdown of the compact that was signed between the Kuki National Assembly and the Autonomous State Demand Committee (U) in September 2000. The Autonomous State Demand Committee (U) signed that agreement with kuki National Assembly only to secure kuki votes in district council election of karbi-Anglong. But the changing political development such as the split in the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) and the return of the Congress (I) to political office in the district led to political turbulence in the district.236

The second factor was the split in the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and the emergence of a pro-talks faction, which signed a ceasefire agreement with the Central government in May, 2002, had made it necessary for the anti-talks faction to assert and to show a more militant posture, resulting the conflict with the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA).237

Third factor which was responsible for the Karbi-Kuki conflict was the collection of ‘tax’ by the Kuki militant outfit, namely, Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA). It is to be noted that after arriving in Karbi Anglong in the early 2001, the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), so far active only in Manipur started collecting ‘tax’, by way of extortion, from the Kuki villages. This is the general practice of the terrorist outfits. But its drive did not remain confined to the Kuki villages; it also infiltrated into the nearby Karbi villages and started extorting money from Karbi villagers, claiming that the Singhason Hills area was a Kuki territory and so it was their own land. The Karbi villagers who refused to pay them were beaten, tortured who, in some cases, lost their life. Facing this oppression and humiliation, some Karbi people contacted the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), which then entered into clash with Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA).238

The fourth factor was that the militant groups clashing among themselves for control over the public resources particularly control over the ginger cultivation and trade, which was a profitable business enterprise in Karbi-Anglong. Both the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) have intimidated the local tribal population in the Singhason hill area which

238 Internet Source: [www. Karbi Information Network. com](http://www.karbiinformationnetwork.com)
produces about 2,000 metric tons (MT) of high quality ginger every year. Therefore, economic blockade over ginger selling was imposed alternatively by United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA). This was a cause of rivalry between United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA). This added to the sufferings of the people.\(^\text{239}\)

The fifth factor was the failure of administration to maintain the law and order and also the unresponsive attitude of the government. The activities such as extortion of money, economic blockade over ginger selling etc went on during 2001 and 2002 and even in 2003. But the govt. did nothing. It remained a silent spectator, because the course of events was in accordance with its design to divide the people of Karbi Anglong, to keep them busy in ethnic clashes so that their attention is diverted from the Autonomous State movement. With a policy of non-interference, they only encouraged the conflict to grow.\(^\text{240}\)

**The Karbi-Dimasa Conflict:**

Following the murder of three auto-rickshaw drivers belonging to the Dimasa tribe by unidentified assailants at Tissom village under Manja police outpost, about 32 kilometers from Diphu, the district headquarters of Karbi Anglong district on 26 September 2005, a spate of retaliatory killings of the two indigenous tribes, the Dimasas and the Karbis started. The most gruesome of the killings occurred on 17 October 2005 when 34 Karbis were hacked to death at Charchim in West Karbi Anglong, about 25 kilometres away from the Kheroni police station. The involvement of armed opposition groups, the Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) claiming to represent ethnic Dimasas and the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), aspiring to represent ethnic Karbis has been established beyond reasonable doubt.\(^\text{241}\)

The Dimasas are an indigenous people of Assam and due to the tribulations of history have their present day home in the North Cachar Hills District. There are also a few Dimasa villages in Karbi Anglong and Cachar Districts. Dimasa organized militancy started with the Dimasa National Security Force, but lacking fizzle, its member’s surrendered enmasse to the government. Subsequently, the

\(^{239}\) ibid
\(^{240}\) ibid
\(^{241}\) Suhas chakma, “Lessons Not Learnt by Assam : Ethnic cleansing and internal displacement in Karbi Anglong and NC Hills,” Asian Centre for Human Rights, New Delhi, 2005
Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) was formed in 1995, which is still a force to be reckoned with. The Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) is premised on the ideology of carving out a separate Dimasa homeland "Dimaraji Kingdom" comprising the Dimasa inhabited areas of North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong, parts of Nowgaon district and parts of Dimapur district of Nagaland. However, internal dissensions have led to the Dima Halam Daogah’s (DHD) split into two outfits, one led by 'commander' Dilip Nunisa and the other by 'former commander' Jewel Gorlosa. The latter group has an alias, 'The Black Widow'.

The other most dominant militant group is the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) in Karbi Anglong. Formed in 1999, the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) is a rebel group fighting for a separate Karbi homeland outside Assam. The two insurgent groups have been engaged in a bitter turf battle for years, with violent clashes killing hundreds and rendering many more homeless in the villages dotting the hilly land of the two districts. According to a report by the Asian Centre for Human Rights, the Karbi-Dimasa clash resulted in the displacement of nearly 44,016 ethnic Karbis and Dimasas in Karbi Anglong, North Cachar Hills and Hojai sub-division of Nowgaon district. What made matters worse was that these two groups laid claim to the same piece of land, especially in the Karbi Anglong district, which is largely dominated by the Karbi tribe.

In the conflict between the Karbis and Dimasas which began on 26 September 2005, about 90 persons were killed before the conflict was brought under control by the first week of November 2005. The victims included 76 Karbis, 11 Dimasas, 1 Bodo, 1 Bengali and 1 Nepali. An estimated 1,014 houses - 534 houses of Karbis, 469 of Dimasas, and 1 of Nepali were burnt down. In this context, the villagers express their anguish that they are increasingly becoming victims of armed clashes between the two insurgent groups.

The seemingly land alienation problem of the indigenous Karbis is supposedly at the root of all the conflicts in Karbi-Anglong. The struggle for

243 ibid
employment opportunities, preservation of their tradition, land settlement, migration of outsiders, government policies, extremist groups fighting on behalf of their community, protection of territorial boundaries, feeling of becoming minorities in their own land and the minorities perceiving the threat from the majorities and so on are some other factors responsible for the conflicts.\(^{245}\) The government failure either to respond to the movement for implementation of Article 244 (A) of the Indian Constitution or to implement the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in 1995 for creation for an autonomous administrative set-up in the district is another factor responsible for accelerating conflict.\(^{246}\) The Government of India had entered into a cease-fire agreement with the United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) which became effective from August 1, 2002, and extended periodically. All the socio-political organisations welcomed the ceasefire agreement with United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and other militant organisations. But only ceasefire agreement is not enough to solve the problem. Insurgency is a socio-political, socio-economic problem, and therefore, political dialogue is very important to bring out a political solution. During the process of negotiation with the insurgents groups, the government indulges (a) in delaying tactics by prolonging the talks (b) encouraged fratricidal clashes and (c) used them for narrow political interest.\(^{247}\) Insurgent groups such as the United Peoples’ Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), Karbi Longrio and N. C Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF), Bodo Liberation Tiger (BLT), Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) and so on, are actually used by different political parties for political gain in Karbi-Anglong. The age old divide and rule policy of the government leading to ethnic conflicts provided enough scope to the insurgent outfits for expansion of their organisations.\(^{248}\) The inefficiency and misrule of the Karbi-Anglong Autonomous Council is also responsible for the emergence of ethnic clash in the region. The Karbi-Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) has failed to deal with the present situation of ethnic conflicts between the

\(^{247}\) ibid
Karbi and Dimasa. The district administration has failed to provide security and to protect the life and property of the common people.  

**The Dimasa – Hmar Conflict:**

The Cachar and North Cachar Hills districts of Assam located in the southern banks of river Brahmaputra witnessed the worst ever-ethnic conflict between the Dimasa and Hmar tribes in March 2003. In this conflict 27 Dimasa people lost their life and thousands were displaced from their respective villages.

The genesis of this conflict lies in attempts of by the Christian Missionaries to proselytize the non-Christian tribe that is the Hindu Dimasas to Christianity. It is to be noted that the Dimasas are demographically the largest tribe in the North Cachar Hills district followed by the Nagas and Hmars. They inhabit the North Cachar Hills, which is sandwiched between the Christian dominated states of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya as well as Manipur. Therefore, it is an opportunity for the Christian missionaries to spread Christianity in this particular area and the missionaries were largely successful in their malicious mission. Christian missionaries tried to convert the Hindu Dimasas into Christianity with the help of the Hmars who ethnically belong to the chin-Kuki-Mizo stock inhabiting the states of Mizoram, Manipur and North Cachar Hills district of Assam. However the Dimasas proved equally determined by rigidly holding their faith Hinduism.

Further the "Indo - Burma Pioneering Mission" sponsored by "Partnership Mission Society” located at Slelmat in Manipur has also been responsible for Dimasa-Hmar conflict. It was engaged for educating the people in the Hmar dominated villages of Cachar and North Cachar Hills. But the fact was that this Mission was used by the Christian Missionaries for camouflaging their anti Hindu proselytizing agenda in North Cachar Hills.

The demand of an autonomous Council under the sixth schedule of the constitution for the Hmar people including the Hmar dominated region of Mizoram

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249 ibid
251 ibid
252 ibid
by the Hmar Militant outfit namely the Hmar Peoples’ Convention-Democratic (HPC-D) is another factor that contributed to this conflict. The Hmar Peoples’ Convention-Democratic (HPC-D) was helped by National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Isac Chishi Swu & Thungaleng Muivah (NSCN -IM) to execute and implement their as well as missionary's agenda in North-Cachar Hills. This was protested by the Dimasas and consequently the clash took place between the two tribes in March 2003.253

**The Garo- Rabha Conflict:**

Recently, the state also witnessed another ethnic conflict. This time, the conflict is between the people of the Garo and Rabha community. The clash between Garos and Rabhas is most unfortunate, because people of both Garo and Rabha communities of both the states Assam and Meghalaya have been living peacefully for many years. In spite of that the conflict took place in January, 2011. It was started on 5th January, 2011, when three Rabha people were killed and eight critically injured by unidentified killer , while the victims were traveling in a bus from Tura, the district headquarters of West Garo Hills in western Meghalaya, towards the state of Assam. It was suspected that Garos were involved in that incidents and as a result, the two tribal groups clashed against each other. On 5th January, 2011, 10 Rabha villages namely Ghurapata, Soinang, Thapa, Jhangla, Babukona, Babupara, Hatibasa and Kem were attacked by Garo people. Over 30 houses belonging to the Rabha community have been burnt down by irate mobs in the East Garo Hills sector bordering Assam. The effects of the trouble have begun to spill over to Bajengdoba area which connects the main National Highway from Assam to Tura. It is to be noted that a Garo person was also killed in police firing near Rangiuli in Assam to control a mob of Garo tribal. The state government of Meghalaya imposed curfew which was extended to other areas in Meghalaya's Resubelpara sub-division on 5th January, 2011 in the wake of escalation of violence. East Garo Hills district Deputy Commissioner Pravin Bakshi deployed army in the violence-hit East Garo Hills district to assist the local police to ensure that there was no further deterioration of law and order situation. In Garo- Rabha conflict 30

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253 *ibid*
villages were burnt to ashes causing displacement of about 30,000 persons from their homes.\footnote{Internet Source: www.merg.ac.in, Utpal Phukan, “Refugee Watch”, 37, June 2011}

**Summary:**

This chapter gives an insight into how ethnic identity and language was used as an instrument to make Assam a nation province of the Assamese. As a result of the aspiration of the ethnic Assamese to make Assam a “nation province” of the Assamese, two successive inter-ethnic conflicts (language movement) took place between ethnic Assamese and Bengalis in 1960 for introducing Assam Official Language Bill and in 1970 for declaration of Assamese as the medium of instruction by two respective universities of Assam namely Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University. Besides these conflicts between the two major groups, the state of Assam also witnessed different other ethnic conflicts in the last decade of 20th century and first decade of 21st century such as Bodo-Santhal conflicts in 1996 in BTAD, Karbi- Kuki in 2003, Karbi – Dimasa in 2005 in Karbi-Anglong, Dimasa-Hmar conflicts in 2003 in North Cachar Hills district. Denial of political autonomy, the rise of ethnic and religious tensions in response to intensifying competition for economic and political opportunities, control over land, establishment of ethnic homeland, insurgents groups or extremist groups fighting on behalf of their community, preservation of one’s own identity custom and tradition, migration of outsiders, government policies, protection of territorial boundaries, feeling of becoming minorities in their own land and the minorities perceiving the threat from the majorities and so on are the causes of ethnic conflicts that have taken place in Assam. There prevail a sense of fear and insecurity among different ethnic groups regarding their position and also about their future in the political set up of Assam. Therefore, ethnicity has emerged as a major instrument for the political parties in their struggle for political power. Ethnic conflicts arise because these are grist to the political mill of electoral campaigns. Political leaders appeal to pride, historic achievements and current injustices—real and imagined—to win elections, to deny the same to opponents and to gain office, position and power. It is in this backdrop, the next chapter will focus on ethnic conflicts and role of political parties in Assam.

\footnote{Internet Source: www.merg.ac.in, Utpal Phukan,” Refugee Watch”, 37, June 2011}