CHAPTER IV
THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

In the previous chapter we saw how the newly created Assamese middle-class was busily engaged in constructing an identity for what they considered to be the Assamese jāti. Several political thinkers have already pointed out the multiple meanings of this particular word in use during the nineteenth century. The ambiguity of the word, jāti, which meant anything from caste, regional group, religious community to the nation was found among the Assamese writings as well. The self-reflexive use of the word showed a conscious realization of the collective identity of a group of people - the Assamese. This identity was fostered by a sense of being different from other identities on the basis of language, region, religion etcetera. The feeling of affinity and oneness that was created about the Assamese community as a collective unit, was also structured around debates of what ought to be the Assamese culture language, dress, food habits, religious festivals and other such signifiers of a social group. The search for an authentic Assamese character, which would be powerful enough to withstand the 'demoralizing' Western influence, was, ironically enough, also conditioned by standards of an ideal culture-type, which would meet the exacting requirements of civilized

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1 See, for example, Sudipta Kaviraj, The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India, Oxford University Press, 1998.
nations of the world. The processes involved in the formation of the Assamese identity were tortuous and multi-layered. The need and the desire for a pure, collective Assamese Self made its construction less than spontaneous. It became an artefact created out of what was deemed as necessary, or rather imperative, to resist the onslaught of the conquering culture.

Philip Schlesinger makes it clear that we have to study "... the means whereby collectivities construct and reconstruct a sense of themselves by reference to the signs provided by cultures ... the making of identities is an active process that involves inclusion and exclusion. To be 'us', we need those who are 'not-us'. Second, the imaginary process of creating traditions and of activating collective memories extends through time. The dark side of memory is amnesia; to shed light is also to throw shadows."

Although the context of Schlesinger's essay is entirely different (the construction of modern Europeanness) his theoretical input can be used for our purposes as well. The referential nature of the formation of identities as well as the dependence on a past or pasts, made pure through an act of the imagination are key factors in his formulation. He lays emphasis on the need for memory as well as of forgetting in the creation of identity during the

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process of nationalism. As I had maintained in an earlier chapter, these concepts have helped in defining the framework of what exactly constitutes nationalism and identity politics during nationalism. Some political scientists have put forward the view that nationalism and anti-colonialism are synonymous entities but it would be more refined to state that anti-colonialism is a major type of nationalism and not the only one. However, the matter to be discussed here is, what primarily structures identity during moments of such political upheaval. During anti-colonial struggles, the people of a community seek to bring themselves together under a common politico-social umbrella so as to be able to put forward, a strong, united, complete front.

Anthony D. Smith puts is succinctly enough, "Identity, purity, regeneration, the 'enemy', historical roots, self-emancipation, building the 'new man' and the 'new community', collective sovereignty and participation – these are some of the themes that recur endlessly in the literature of nationalism. They provide the chief impetus for the peculiar activities of nationalist movements ... And behind it all, a ceaseless evaluation and measuring of self and the present with the 'significant other'."

The complex nature of this evaluation and measurement can be seen in the early stages of the nationalist movement. The newly educated members of

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the subject community sometimes found their own societies wanting when compared to the 'superior' culture of the conquering power. Therefore, a very complicated censorship of 'native' customs became the need of the hour in order to compete with the civilization skills of the conquering nation. In the context of Assam, we see an acceptance of the social mores and morals of the British in the early stages of British rule, a study of which forms the subject matter of the following sub-chapter.

CONSENT AND OPPOSITION

In this sub-chapter, I shall look at acceptance of as well as resistance to British rule in Assam. Although my discussion will involve two different poles in the class-hierarchy, I will try to show how the business of identity-formation was neither an easy nor a unified one. The first part of this portion of the chapter will deal with the collusion of the Assamese elite with the colonizers, not merely in the political sense, but in a more complex and nuanced social sense. Although, this has always been given secondary importance compared to say economic domination, in studies of how colonialism works, John Breuilly says; "It has often been recognised that imperialism works effectively only if it is accepted by much of colonial
society and if it actually operates through a network of indigenous collaborators."^4

These indigenous collaborators are usually more numerous during the early stages of colonialism. They collude with the 'masters' for purposes of personal gain or sometimes, strangely enough, for the benefit of the indigenous society. I wish to discuss there, how the Assamese festival for the New Year, the Bɔhāg Bifju became a site for much debate. The dances and the erotic songs came in for much condemnation and their censorship became a matter of national interest. In as early as 1829, immediately after the British conquest of Assam, we see Ḫolirām Dhɛkiāl Phukon writing in his oxom Buronji that,

"Most rural people do not know of Durgā Puja; the Phāgu festival is observed everywhere, aside from these, Jonmāstɔmi and Sibirɔtri are noticed. Rɔthjātra, Ṫogɔdhɔṭi Puja, Kārtik Puja etc., are not seen. The dramatic performance that is held annually on the day of the death of the head of Xɔtɔ Vaishnavite monastery is the chief festival in the villages. Another festival is that there is Bifju music instead of the Sorɔk festival (of Bengal) for seven days till Bɔhāg . There womenfolk of the common people and

^4 John Breuilly, Nationalism and the State, Manchester University Press, Manchester,
dissolute men get together and perform dance and music of a very objectionable type."  

Dhekial Phukon’s diatribe against the Bifju festival is prefixed by an unseemly adulation of ‘Bengali’ festivals. The festivals, which he enumerates, are ‘purely’ Hindu festivals found in the vicinity of Assam and her neighbouring areas. Legitimation of the Assamese culture could occur only through a total acceptance of the high culture of neighbouring Bengal or through a jettisoning of local Assamese festivals, which somehow point toward un-Hinduness or toward certain imperfect pasts. Dhekial Phukon takes pains to emphasize that this festival is celebrated by the lower classes of people, the commoners and not by the elite to which he belonged. However in Chapter III, I had mentioned that Rāgh’ Mūrān, the Muămriā rebel was attacked by Kurongonyon when he bowed down to offer his respects to the Bifju singers who were conspirators in disguise. This proves that the Bifju festival had flourished under royal patronage and although its Hindu credentials are still questionable, it was surely enjoyed by the vast numbers of Assamese in the Brahmaputra valley as well as by the Adivasis of the area.


In 1841, we have another reference to the *Bôhâg Bihû* festival, this time by British official, William Robinson in his *Descriptive Account of Assam*. Here too, the description of the festival is far from appreciative and we see a clear othering of the Assamese through an enumeration of the strangeness of their rituals.

"The Assamese have two principal festivals, called Bihu. The first festival of the year is termed the Baisak Bihu, and is celebrated in the first three days of Baisak. The cause of their rejoicing is two-fold; first that the month of Choitra … has expired; second, that it is succeeded by a month of which every day is fortunate. The cows are worshipped with peculiar honours … the consecrated animals are then driven in a body through the villages, by crowds of people who make a discordant noise upon various musical instruments. During the remainder of the day the cows are permitted to stray wherever they please, and seek a pasture in every field without restraint. On the two following days of the festival, large groups of people parade about, attended by numbers of dancing girls, who pause from time to time to exhibit their wanton movements, and charm the audience with their lascivious songs…"³⁶

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The discordant music, the 'wanton movements', the 'lascivious songs' all put forward the sensuous nature of the Bhāg Bīj festival. Seen as a primitive and mysterious festival involving fertility rites of an old, agricultural society, Robinson's ethnographic account very clearly condemns the rituals of this springtime festival. The carnivalesque jouissance of the Bīj revellers was seen as dangerous. The uninhibited dancing and singing, the emphasis on being 'without restraint', all these were written about in clearly condemnatory terms. The discursive universe of the Bīj festival, in the writings of the colonizers, was influenced by the general feeling that it was a signifier of the lowly status of Assamese society. In a community where sexual permissiveness was celebrated as the main festival, the civilizational aspirations of that society could not be too high. In as late as 1906, B.C. Allen could write thus –

"A girl may perhaps, have been courted for some years. Each Bihu her lover brought her loads of rice, plantains, curds and even pieces of opium to her father, and then at the last moment she goes off with someone else. The aggrieved suitor naturally seeks to be reimbursed for his expenditure, and the father in his turn endeavours to extort money from the favoured man. The elopements and abductions are especially common during the Bihu time."

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The picture of a dissolute society is created whereby the fickle bride, the incompetent suitor, the unscrupulous father become characters in the representation of a scandalous community which sanctions 'elopements' and 'abductions' by celebrating the time of the year which creates situations conducive for such activity. The internalisation of the wickedness of this festival among the newly educated elite created a sense of embarrassment and a wish to disown this part of their social lives. Various writings in the second half of the nineteenth century in the innumerable Assamese journals and periodicals which mushroomed all over Assam and Bengal repeatedly urged the common masses to turn away from the openly conducted courtship festivities associated with the spring-time Bifju. Indeed, educated young men were exhorted to write and speak vehemently against the Bifju whenever they found an opportunity to do so. The acceptance of the inferiority of some particular social customs associated with the Bifju festival became a source of shame and anger for many of the members of the 'new community'. The constant comparisons and the measurement and evaluation vis-à-vis the colonizing nation's cultural achievements became the topic of many an essay.

In March 1890, Komolakanta Bhottosarjo in a long article entitled, 'Assam's Progress' took up the issue of Bifju and engaged in a convoluted
argument against the celebration of those festivals, which hinder the progress of society. He waxed eloquent on the idea of the national life of a people, which will be able to stand morally at par with the cultural ideals of other civilized nations of the world. He writes –

"Those festivals and celebrations which create injury or mischief should be thrown away from our society ... All things have their limits, transgressing those limits can only cause problems... If the dance of a civilized nation and the Biʃu dance were to be imagined as two young girls, the former will seem beautifully dressed, wearing pretty ornaments, singing sweetly and dancing steadily. Whereas the latter (the Biʃu dance) will seem like an ugly and naked girl gesticulating wildly. The shameless words of the Biʃu songs make one cover one's ears and escape with Sri Bisnu's name on one's lips. These uncivilized incidents are a matter of great shame and humiliation for us. We can hear Biʃu songs, shameless words even from the mouths of five or six year old village boys. Reader, pay attention to the national character of such a people."\(^x\)

The acknowledgement of the degenerate and despicable nature of one's own social customs also arose from the fear and the horror of how the colonizer reacted to the same customs. The cringe of shame in the colonized

\(^x\) Junaṅki March 1890, Komolakanto Bhottosarjo, "Oxomdr UnnDit", DHAS.
mind was an equivalent reaction to the exclamation of disgust by the colonizer. There was also a realization that a 'new community' with a 'modern' and 'pure' national character can be created only after discarding those elements, which were vile and worthless. Bhottosārjo in the same essay writes — "Those rituals or habits which disgrace our national character or life are very harmful and to remove them, the educated should work very hard. When the picture of Bhāg Bifū comes before our eyes, how embarrassed and shamed we are, as if our noses have been cut. The educated young men should think about this. The foreigners see our Bifū and they ridicule and slander us. And they do not accept the chastity of our women." 

This strident essay very clearly makes a connection between the rigorous discipline needed for a culture like the Assamese to come into its own and also the responsibility of the young educated men of the community to work hard and bring about this change. The moral structures of a very Christian sexual ethic were appropriated very easily in order to stand on equal terms with the conquering nation. Also, the rhetoric for the creation of a

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9 Ibid. See also for instance, Rūneswār Mōhāntā's 1890, poem Bifū, in Jōgendronārāyōn Bōruā (ed.) Rūneswār Mōhāntā Rōsonāhāli, Assam Publication Board, Guwahati, 1977, p.106. :-

Remove Bifū's shameless songs

Let there be God's bhōjān  let there be kirtān
Let us remove impure thoughts."
national character (*jātīya sārtr̥aṇa*) engages with the need for censorship and ultimately for a complete ban on the *Bhāg Bījū* festival.

It was only towards the beginning of the twentieth century that we see a change in the attitude towards *Bījū*. The leading writer of the time, Lokhināth Bezborua wrote several articles supporting the festival. It is interesting to note that the essay from which I am going to quote was written in 1917, a time when Assam was moving very fast towards an involvement in national politics. A new sense of identity, a pride in what made the Assamese different, could be seen in the writings of this period.

Bezborua, in his typically caustic style, writes –

"*Bhāg Bījū* does not hurt anyone; it gives joy to all, therefore it is that people mock at and condemn *Bījū*. *Bījū* dresses God's garden by spreading soft hues on tree leaves and thus increasing their glow; heightens the attraction of orchids by hanging on them beautiful wreaths; makes the asoka tree lovely by putting on it bouquets of blossoms ... makes you youthful, so that you can behave youthfully ... now this *Bījū* is condemned by our people!"¹⁰

¹⁰ "Bāfi", May 1917, Lokhināth Bezborua, *Bhāg Bījū*. DIAS.
The long route from total revulsion to total approval that the Assamese intelligentsia took with reference to the Bifju festival is worthy of an in-depth study in the context of nationalism. In the nineteenth century the self-image of the Assamese 'new man' came from a value-system, which was not indigenous. The importation and the attempt at legitimation of a foreign ethical sexual code could have been primarily due to a sense of embarrassment about a past, which was less than perfect. As we have seen earlier, nationalism rests on the assumption of a nation's past. And the first phase of aversion can be explained not only at the level of appropriation of the colonizer's morals as one's own but also as a desire to craft a perfect present and a pristine past for the Assamese nation, a past worthy of respect and glorification.

The other end of the spectrum which came about in the beginning of the twentieth century; the adoring veneration for Bifju marks a change in the general tendency of Indian nationalism itself. The new pride in forging a relationship with the Indian mass movement, which started with Gandhi, also simultaneously and paradoxically showed a growing acknowledgement of one's own 'ethnic' identities. The infantile acceptance of the paternalist rulers had changed into a more charged questioning of colonialism, which resulted in a new construction of who the Assamese really were. Moreover, the need to
connect more strongly and positively with the life and the social habits of the common people gave rise to this trend in the writings of the period.*

(ii)

In this section of the chapter, I wish to focus on the peasant uprising which spread throughout Assam in 1893-94. Although peasant revolts were not given much importance in histories of nationalism till about the 1960's, subsequent theoretical frameworks have been created to define the different structures of the numerous struggles, which broke out in various pockets of India during the British rule. The earlier attitude towards peasant uprisings can be seen in Anthony D. Smith when he writes that we should not confuse the 'nationalism' of the traditional peasant with the 'nationalism' of the urban intelligentsia. He writes –

"Whether we call it 'nationalism' or 'ethnocentricism' the sentiment of the peasant, his bitter enmity to the outsider, is really a kind of traditional solipsism; his 'nationalism' is monocentric and closed'. The 'nationalism' of the educated civil servant, the teacher, the officer or the professional is quite different. It is outward-looking, it accords value of a sort to the outsider ... We should not confuse the two attitudes ... It is the outward-looking, 'modern' nationalism that has provided the fuel for nationalist movements all over the

* For further discussion on the Bifju, see Chapter V.
world since the French Revolution. The solipsist attitude rarely provides a sufficient basis for political movements."

D. Smith's thesis is almost in keeping with the long line of British historians and officers who termed peasant uprisings as regressive and unreasonable. Moreover, his privileging of the middle-class movements for the study of nationalist histories instead of attempts to understand and interpret peasant struggles shows a bias against movements, which he calls 'monocentric' and 'closed'. The 'outward-looking' nationalism of the urban elite with their 'modernity' and their Western education is the only kind of nationalism worthy of study. Recent studies have however shown that there had been very strong and consistent peasant revolts against British rule in India. Their kind of opposition to the colonial outsider also saw an opposition against those 'indigenous collaborators' of colonial rule, for example, the rich landlords who gained economic profits due to the intervention of the British in rural land administration.

David Hardiman writes that the Naxalite movement in the late 1960s forced many historians to revise their opinion about peasant resistance in India. Hardiman shows how "The Naxalite movement led to a revival of interest in the history of peasant insurgency in India. It was found that this

\[11\] Anthony D. Smith, pp.106-7.
history had been either denied or marginalized.\textsuperscript{12} He quotes Kathleen Gough's influential 1974 essay on 'Indian Peasant Uprisings' published in \textit{Economic and Political Weekly} who had argued that peasant militancy actually had a long history.

"This had been denied in many studies, which argued that rural resistance had in most cases been led by the upper classes of the country side, such as landlords and rich peasants, who had used ties of patronage and caste to mobilize the poorer peasants ... When the poor had rebelled, their resistance was often described as mere outlawry or a form of 'communalism', rather than as a protest against harsh agrarian conditions."\textsuperscript{13}

After the reassessment of land-revenue in Assam in 1893 under Mr. H.Z. Darrah, Director of the Department of Land Records and Agriculture, and Mr. Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, the revised rates were fixed at an average of 53 percent, but in certain areas were exorbitantly increased to as high as 70 to 100 percent. In 1893, the bad harvest due to scarce rainfall had already affected the people economically and they resisted the increase in revenue. The Chief Commissioner refused to pay heed to the various memorials sent to him but later agreed to reduce the increase to an average of 37 percent. However by then, the people were already very agitated and

\textsuperscript{12} David Hardiman (ed.). \textit{Peasant Resistance in India (1858-1914)}, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1992, p.6.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p.6.
spontaneously gathered together in ‘raij-mēls’ to decide upon a unanimous refusal to pay the high rents on their land. The ryots were paying an ever-increasing price for opium, which had by then become a government monopoly and was very heavily taxed. Moreover, the local Marwari traders had also shackled them in usury from which they had no hope for escape.  

On 24 December 1893, after the holding of a mēl in Belagaon, around two hundred people looted the Rangiya market. Many more mēls were held in December and January and it was decided in these mēls that the people will not pay the increased rates. On 30 December around a thousand people demonstrated in Rangiya and on January 1894, the District Magistrate himself came down to try and curb the unrest. Fifteen persons were arrested which led to a more serious disturbance. The people asked for the release of their leaders as also for the reduction of rates. Around two thousand people armed with lathis stormed the Thana in order to free the fifteen men and ultimately, the District Magistrate opened fire on them. Although nobody was reported killed, these incidents found wide coverage in the Bengali Press of the time.

14 A rāij-mēl is a gathering of people to discuss issues. rāij in Assamese is people and rāij-mēl means to talk or discuss.

The Native Newspaper Reports of Bengal\textsuperscript{16} gave wide publicity to the uprising and severely condemned the unpopular taxation measures.

Several more incidents of these kind happened throughout January 1894 in Rangiya, Nalbari, Barama and Bajali and all licensed arms were confiscated. On 28 January, the District Magistrate of Darrang was gheraoed in his rest house by thousands of men who refused to move away until their demands were met. They were charged with bayonets and fired at and around fifteen ryots lost their lives in this attack. Finally the Government of India was compelled under the pressure of the struggle to reduce the land revenue rates to an average of 32.7 percent and for individual land-holdings to a maximum of 50 percent.

Amalendu Guha writes in \textit{Planter Raj to Swaraj},

"The widespread peasant struggle, based on the unity of the entire peasantry and a section of the non-cultivating landowners, made an impact on the contemporary Assamese society. The non-cultivating landowners-Brahmins, Mahantas and Dolois, the traditional rural elite – apparently took the initiative and leading role. But it was the poor peasantry and other sections of the rural poor, including the artisans who actually lent it a militant character."\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} Native Newspaper Reports : Bengal, The National Archives, New Delhi.
\textsuperscript{17} Amalendu Guha, p.54.
It should be pointed out that this statement is quite apt in the light of the fact that there was a vast difference between the two modes of approach to the struggle. The 'traditional rural elite' followed a very moderate approach of sending memorials and petitions to be considered by the government whereas the anger and agitation of the people broke out in spontaneous upheavals whenever opportunities presented themselves. The 'leaders' felt that they might lose their feudal privileges if they went too strongly against the British. Manorama Sharma Barma in an essay makes an incisive analysis of the situation –

"Although the leadership made common cause with the ryots on the issue of revenue enhancements, one must bear in mind that this leadership had a vested interest in the maintenance of their links with the colonial state. Many of these leaders or scions from their families were at the receiving end of pecuniary benefits from the British – for their services in the various rungs of the administrative machinery of the government. Because of these vested interests and the class character of the leaders it was not possible for them to go the full length of the uprising with the peasants."  

The ambivalence and sometimes even disapproval of the peasant movements, which we see among the intelligentsia, was very clearly present

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even in the 1893-94 peasant uprising of Assam. The lack of empathy with peasant needs determines most of the activity of the period. However, there was also the desire to be seen as forging a new bond with the tillers of the soil, the people of the land, as it were. Therefore, when an opportunity presented itself, they participated in a half-hearted, ambiguous way, which left much to be desired. In the affected areas of Assam, tenants constituted a large percentage of the population and occupied around one-third of the settled area. Guha surmises that it must have been the fear on the part the landowners regarding loss of profit as middlemen which led them to take part in the agitation. But the fear of losing their property under attachment orders lowered their resistance and they were among the first to retreat.

Interestingly, in Assam, several local associations had been formed in 1880s under the initiative of the local elite to meet and protest against any new taxes. The Tezpur Ryot Xobha was formed in 1884 and in 1886 the Shillong Association, the Nougao Ryot Xobha and the Upper Assam Association were formed. The most telling feature of these Ryot Sabhas was the fact that the educated middle class had no proper guidelines for organised agitation and their protests remained at the level of petitioning. Moreover, in the areas where these modern Ryot Sabhas and Associations were active, the 1893-94 peasant uprising had no effect at all and no mass struggles ever took place. The more conservative among them saw even this fraternizing with the
peasantry by some of the educated elite with jaundiced eyes by. In 1887, in an article written for his own periodical, *Mou*, Bōlinārayon Bōrā criticized the peasants gathering to discuss their problems in these *Ryot Sabhas*.

"The poor peasant remains as wise as he was when he came to the meeting; his only gain is the loss of the four ploughing days lost in coming and going and annas two paid towards the sending of the petition. Such are the origin and functions of the peasant meetings of Assam."  

The above discussion has shown us that the participation of the educated middle class in the peasant movement in Assam was at best ambivalent. The rural elite was more concerned about their own interests and their half-hearted attempts at resistance were soon discarded when they had to confront the strict reprisals of the British officers. This sub-chapter, Consent and Opposition, aimed at showing the contradictions and hesitations in the methods used by the new educated class in creating a unified Assamese identity. The faith in the inherent goodness of British rule was one of the main obstacles in the movement towards a proper kind of anti-colonialist nationalism. There was a fear of the lower orders of society, the commoners, the peasants, the low-caste artisans. Even though some of the writings of the day glorified the simplicity and the poverty of their lives, there was, more

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often than not, a desire to see them properly contented. Whenever their anger
or their needs occupied the floor, the educated elite escaped ostrich-like into
the safe confines of their own abstract concerns.

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

The relationship of language to the complex process of nationalism is a
question, which has vexed almost all the thinkers who have engaged with this
subject. A country like India with its numerous languages, offers a rich
ground for the formulation of theoretical assumptions regarding the place of
language in creating nationalist identities. During India's struggle for
freedom, the question of language was significantly problematised and certain
languages were put forward as rich enough or common enough to don the
mantle of the national language. This however was not an easily resolved
issue, especially since there were various other well-developed languages in
all parts of India, which were ready to debate the privileged space given to
these few languages. The controversy over the Assamese language was
another matter altogether. Within a decade of British rule, Assamese was
ousted from official discourse and Bengali became the language of the courts
in Assam. In the latter half of this sub-chapter I will look at the labours of the
intelligentsia, which struggled to create a potent new language and also to
make it into a language of power. However, before I deal with the details and
processes of standardising the Assamese language, creating a grammar, a
dictionary, a literature, I wish to look at the way certain eminent political
scientists have placed language, or rather linguistic nationalism in the broader
context of political nationalism.

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In Europe in the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, the
pressures of modernization and industrialization evoked various reactions,
which crystallized into several thought-provoking treatises on the idea and
evolution of the nation. For instance the German organic, Romantic school of
thought, or the 'organic' version of nationalism, under its chief propounders,
Herder and Fichte, gave special cognizance to the significant place occupied
by language in the creation a national identity. Herder's starting point in his
thesis is that only language has made man human. Man is defined by his
capacity for language, which can be learnt only within a community.
Moreover, since language is synonymous with thought, it follows that each
community has its own style and structure of thought. It is the manifestation
of the unique values and ideas of the community. Language may change
through time but it cannot be radically transformed. Finally, languages cannot

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20 See his "Essay on the Origin of Language", in FM Barnard (ed.), J.G. Herder on Social
be relatively defined as superior or inferior because there does not exist any possibility of measurement.

Fichte goes slightly further than Herder and his concern is not merely with the aesthetics of pure language. For Fichte, language reflected the soul of a nation and it was necessary to keep the national spirit pure without allowing the perversions of foreign tongues and foreign values into the pure German soul. He was against the importation of 'dead' Latin words into German and his defence of the 'living' language was also a defence of the community, which used the language.

The German-Romantic vision of the nation was that the life of the nation was a continuous struggle, but once it came into its own, it 'realised' itself in all its uniqueness. This doctrine embraces three basic ideas (i) cultural diversity which takes from Herder's contention that different language-groups constitute different 'organic' nations, (ii) national self-realisation through struggle and (iii) the organic state is actually a manifestation of the individual's will. These two latter points were Fichte's contribution. There arises therefore a great emphasis on the virtues of education, which for Fichte was a tool for inculcating the 'national spirit' within the nation's individuals.

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This discussion of Herder and Fichte's primary theses regarding nationalism and language is necessary in the context of the fact that one of the major twentieth century theorists of nationalism, Elie Kedourie, argues for the German-Romantic school of thought and says that this in an ideal-type philosophy, which he then, rather incongruously, uses to explain nationalism in other areas of the world. He asserts that language can never be the only cornerstone of nationalism. Kedourie regards nationalism as an extremely destructive force, which results in a collapse of traditional values and a breakdown of social apparatuses. It also sees the rise of an educated, secular class of people who are impatient and ambitious for power, which remains out of their grasp. Kedourie's criticism of nationalism is quite strident and he is against the creation of primordial identities without any real test of what constitutes a nation. In one of his celebrated and oft-quoted passages, he writes –

"If nationalism cannot provide a satisfactory account of past political developments, neither can it supply a plain method whereby nations may be isolated from one another and constituted into sovereign states ... Races, languages, religions, political traditions and loyalties are so inextricably intermixed that there can be no clear convincing reason why people who speak the same language, but whose history and circumstances otherwise widely diverge, should form one state, or why people who speak two different
languages and whom circumstances have thrown together should not form one state. The inventors of the doctrine (of nationalism) tried to prove that nations are obvious and natural divisions of the human race, by appealing to history, anthropology and linguistics... (but) there is no convincing reason why the fact that people speak the same language or belong to the same race should, by itself, entitle them to enjoy a government exclusively their own ... Of course, academic disciplines like philology, can make a powerful auxiliary for such a political doctrine and enable it to secure conviction and assent."22

This rather long quotation permits us to understand some of Kedourie's primary conjectures regarding the place of linguistic nationalism. Kedourie however fails to explain why existing social structures collapse under the weight of new ideas during the process of nationalism. His critique remains ineffective in answering the difficult question of why, at a particular historical juncture, certain long-standing beliefs and habits become irrelevant. Be that as it may, his conservative views and fear of nationalism gave rise to Ernest Gellner's famous criticism in his Thought and Change (1964) Gellner turns Kedourie upside down and he argues that it is the yearning for cultural homogeneity in modern societies, which gives birth to nationalism. For Gellner, nationalism is a veritable off-shoot of modernization and language is a charged unit in this uneven and agonising movement towards nationhood.

His main contention is that 'nationality' classifications are actually 'cultural' and these are, or rather ought to be, linguistic in nature. For him, the key criterion for nationhood is language; and the precondition is education in the modern condition. In a situation when there is a clash between the modern and the traditional, or when there is an imposition of a 'higher culture' on what he calls "sleeping beauty" nations, there arises the need for an understandable mode of communication. He writes,

"When interlocutors and contexts are all unfamiliar, the message itself must become intelligible – it is no longer understood, as was the case in traditional societies, before it was even articulated – and those who communicate must speak the same language in some sense or other."\(^{23}\)

Gellner's over emphasis on language and his use of 'language' and 'culture' as almost interchangeable terms has been severely criticised from several quarters. Chief among these criticisms have been, (i) culture is a wider category than language, (ii) classification by 'nationality' is not equal to classification by language, (iii) nationalism is not a linguistic movement, (iv) moreover his idea of literacy also needed to be modified.

However it cannot be denied that the entire question of the development of particular languages is very much a part of certain nationalist movements. For example, in India, many eminent nationalists were very

deeply involved in philological studies of their own languages. There is also very close links between literary renaissances, language modernisation and the rise of certain nationalist movements, which is what I propose to show in the case of Assam. Assam's case is particularly interesting because of various reasons. Assamese as a written language in the modern sense was 'created' by the American Baptists with the help of a few eminent local men in their journal, 'The Oracle'. By then, Bengali had already spread its tentacles in all officials discourse in Assam and Assamese languished without any proper patronage. All the clerical posts went to outsiders, which generated dissatisfaction; moreover, most Assamese students did badly in school because of what Gellner calls "a bifurcation between the language of school and home". The selected language also lacked the convenience of an "old-established literate idiom". Another interesting feature was that, although Bengali faced fierce resistance, there was little or resistance towards the English language which was accepted with open arms.

(ii)

In an anonymous article, subtitled in English as "The Assamese and the Bengali Languages", published in the Oracle in November 1854, the two languages, Bengali and Assamese are allegorically presented as mothers. One loved and appreciated, the other disowned. Ironically, the mother who is

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24 Ibid., p.160.
loved is the step-mother, Bengali, and the real mother, Assamese, pines away for her children. The article starts with some young boys walking a little away from habitation and meeting a woman in tattered rags. They take fright and run away, shouting and screaming all the while. They are consoled and quietened by their step-mother and she goes in search of the ‘witch’ who had terrified her sons. When she meets her, she asks her who she was and why she was roaming around in torn clothes and frightening people. ‘Assamese Language’ replies-

"O Mother, why do you ask me about my bad fortune? There is nothing worth talking about. My condition is such that it would be best if I just died. What can I tell you about my sad story? You already know everything. But since you have asked me, I will tell you. My home is this country of Assam; my name, Assamese language. These young men who saw me and ran away in fear are my children. Since their birth I have taught them to say father, mother, brother, but now that they have grown up, they have gone away to you".25

The agony of the metaphorical mother is used to heighten the disillusionment, which was felt by many at that time about the increasing 'Bengalisation' of the indigenous population. Many evil effects and the influence of the Bengali language on the people were enumerated with detail

25runudoi, Noveomeber 1854, ṛxomiā bhāxā āru baṇāli bhāxā.
in articles written in the *durnudoi*. There was also the feeling that it was only because of the patronage of the British that Bengali had risen in status and prestige. In the same article, ‘Assamese Language’ says –

"O Mother, now you are disgusted with me and shy away from me. But what was your own condition in earlier times? Did you have this shapely form before the English kings came to rule us? Listen to me. My ungrateful children have left me but the 'Sāhābs' of the great country, America, have given me shelter and nurtured me".26

This of course, takes us back to what I had discussed in an earlier chapter about the three vertices of power equations in Assam in the nineteenth century, especially in the sphere of generation of knowledge and spread of education: The two alien powers, America and Britain, as the givers and withholders of knowledge respectively, and the Assamese recipients at the three points. But what I wish to talk about here is the equation of the Bengali language with Bengali culture, which was made by various writers. The 'Bengalisation', which I had mentioned was seen as a corrupting influence on young minds. In an article sub-titled in English as 'Second Letter from an Assamese in Calcutta', the writer states –

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26 Ibid.
* See Chapter ii
"Those people who have gone from Bengal and settled in our country may be said to be the reason behind our country's bad state of affairs. When there were no Bengali people in our country there were no such evil habits among the Assamese. But since the time when they started coming to our country in large numbers, our young men in their company have started learning bad habits. Drinking, visiting prostitutes, cheating, making false court cases, all these our people had not even heard about previously, but are now learning very fast."²⁷

This article, probably written by Áænánddrám Dhekiali-Phukan, repeats certain ideas, which he had already put forward in the April 1847 issue of the Drunudoi when he had said that the strict caste system in Bengal was a hindrance to progress. The vices of the immigrant Bengali caste Hindu society were very easily imitated into a society, which had not earlier known stringent caste rules. Nineteenth century societal change in Assam was modelled on the Bengali society, which had settled there. Guha writes that the aping of Bengali ways of life tended to make the Assamese caste-system more rigorous. He writes –

"The Assamese Brahmin's rigidity against widow-remarriage was extended further by the model set by the Bengali caste – Hindu elite. Even the

²⁷ Drunudoi, July 1853, उखृष्टम देशर लोक सोकुदर प्रदीप दितीयो निदेदन पूर्दो.
Kalitas – a dominant peasant caste of Assam, which had no such traditional prejudice, began to take a stand against widow re-marriages. Theories were invented to establish that the Kağıta was identical with the Kayastha or even the Kshatriya. Similarly, the simple rites of marriage practiced by non-Brahmins at popular level were being progressively replaced by elaborate ... rituals presided over by Brahmin priests.\textsuperscript{28}

The problem faced by the Assamese elite who struggled to give the Assamese language its lost glory, in the nineteenth century was that the Bengali language was associated in the minds of the people with Bengali culture, which was accepted as a 'higher culture'. The internalisation of this fact was such that the Assamese language came to be seen as a dialect of Bengali and was not considered worthy of study. In an October 1854 article, 'Letter from Calcutta', Anondoram Dhēkiāl-Phukōn writes that Assamese is seen with disdain by the people of Assam. He writes –

"Some people say, 'Is वङ्मि a language? If we learn it, what do we gain? Assamese words, rituals, religions, habits, behaviour, all are bad, only bañāli is good."\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{28} Amalendu Guha, pp.68-9.
\textsuperscript{29} Drunudoi, October 1854, "Kōlikdur Porā Ḑha Pōtrō". G.U. Library.
The Gellnerian equation between language and culture works quite effectively here, however incongruous it may seem otherwise. The 'sleeping beauty' nation, Assam was just waiting for the right princes to come and wake her up and return to her lost glory. Ironically enough, in Assam it was primarily because of the struggle to reinstate Assamese within the portals of power, which resulted in the creation of a nationalistic ethos. Even before the English came to be seen as the enemy, the Bengalis were seen as foreigners and immigrants who were wrestling away plum jobs from the Assamese youth. Indeed, the English were seen in the early stages as slightly unhelpful masters who ought to become magnanimous and help the Assamese language just as they had helped the Bengali people to develop the Bengali language. In a September 1946 article, "First Letter to the Little Readers of the Orunodoi". Dhēkīāl-Phukôn talks about how learning English would only help the Assamese to prosper and gain knowledge.

"Those who have gained knowledge from English books should spread this knowledge in the language of Assam. In this way, almost everybody will gain some knowledge and the language of this country will become better and gradually, knowledge will also increase. You will have good books and in them you will learn about religion and various other arts and sciences. If you want to be civilized, learn the English language ... If you want to earn the respect and praise of people in this country, learn English and spread the
knowledge you gain by writing in the language of this country. In this way, the poor and ignorant people will be greatly helped."30

Learning English was seen as imperative in the political ethos of the day. The upward mobility which knowledge of the English language promised was not something that the Assamese people could well ignore. They were indeed continuously exhorted by the educated elite to send their sons to English schools and learn English ways of life in order to change the situation in Assam for the better. But it was not always that the Assamese thinker found due commendation from the English. When Hemsendra Borua found that the first standard 'Anglo-Assamese Dictionary' compiled by Miles Bronson, of the 'Orunodoi', had gone out of print, he took upon himself his life's work – compiling one of his own, which he called 'An Etymological Dictionary of the Assamese Language'. In his preface he mentions that he found Bronson's dictionary wanting in many respects, specially spelling according to the laws of Assamese grammar. P.R. Gurdon, the editor of the work, also the Deputy Commissioner at the time, notes –

"Notwithstanding what has been said by the author in his preface, regarding Bronson's dictionary, it is, I think, generally agreed that Bronson's

30 Orunodoi, September 1846, Orunodoi Pdrhā Xōru L brābilākdr Prōti Prōthdm Pdndi Pdūd.
work supplied a useful means of reference to those studying the Assamese language ... 

"The duty of editing this work has not been a light one ... the English portion has been found in much need of revision and in many places it has been found necessary to rewrite it altogether."\(^{31}\)

Although the inability of Assamese intelligence to grasp the nuances of the English language is not the topic under discussion, it very vividly tells us about the yearnings and aspirations of a subject people who had to struggle towards self-respect every step of the way. I, however, wish to go back to the matter of ḇemsŏndrŏ ḅoruạ’s grouse against Bronson and his ilk. The first champions of the Assamese language were, as we have seen, the Sibsagar group of American Baptists. They tried to construct, out of almost nothing, an Assamese, which was close to the language spoken by the ordinary man. The first attempts at standardisation of the Assamese language were also made in the pages of the ḅrunudoi. The educated natives, strangely enough, towards

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31 P.R. Gordon, Introduction to the 'Hėm-Kóx or An Etymological Dictionary of the Assamese Language' by ḇemsŏndrŏ ḅoruạ (1900), Ajanta Prakashan, Delhi : 1997, p.iii.

Gordon’s uneasiness may be traced to the possibility of what Benedict Anderson calls 'egalitarianism among languages'. Anderson says –

"Bilingual dictionaries made visible an approaching egalitarianism among languages – whatever the political realities outside, within the covers of the ... dictionary the paired languages had a common status." – Anderson, p.71.
the end of the nineteenth century, came to strongly disapprove of the Assamese, which had found expression in the Drunudoi.

. The common grouse was that Sanskrit words had been deleted from the vocabulary making it poorer. In a report written by Brown in 1858, we see one of the first articulations of the Assamese elites' point of view —

"Our books are also unpopular with the educated natives ... They say that in our books a mode of spelling is introduced offensive to their taste, and contrary to that correct mode used in their Shasters. This gives the government a strong weapon against us."\(^{32}\)

Sanskrit came to be seen as the panacea for all ills in the Assamese language. It would rescue and liberate Assamese from its 'inferior' status and grant it the respectability it so craved. Sanskrit would also connect Assam to the mainland of India and place Assamese in its historical tradition, making its antecedents unquestionable. Young men were always encouraged and persuaded to learn Sanskrit in order to better the Assamese language. In "Letter from Calcutta", \(\text{Āṇḍārām Dhekial-Phukan}\) says:

"If we look properly, we will see that a large number of Sanskrit words are present in the Bengali language and that is why they are so full of pride ...\

Assamese also, like Bengali is a branch of Sanskrit. Now, we see, young men think that Assamese is inferior to Bengali. This is a grave mistake. There is no doubt that if we learn Sanskrit and beautify our language, it will also become like Bengali.\textsuperscript{33}

English and Sanskrit were almost at par in the drive for the legitimization of Assamese language and culture. The educated elites' desire to create a highly Sanskritised Assamese tells us about their ideological moorings. The power-play involved in the standardization of the Assamese language tells a lot about the politics implicit in the process of knowledge-generation. Sanskrit was taken as the foundation in order to formulate rules about Assamese grammar, spelling and syntax. The fact that Assamese did not possess gender differentiation in its grammar was a matter of great debate and concern. Sanskrit was the foothold on which Assamese held on to in its shaky movement towards finding a place in the highly hierarchical space of Indian languages.

The \textit{Drumdoi Bhāxā Unnōti Xādhōni Xoīhā} was founded in Calcutta by a few Assamese young men in order to work for the improvement of the Assamese language. In the opening speech of its second conference in 1891,

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Drumdoi}, October 1854.
Hemsondro Guswami begins by saying that "discussion and struggle is the basis of all progress" and goes on to pin-point the problems facing Assamese –

"Some people say Assamese is not an independent language with its own literature. It is merely an unrefined state of Bengali. Even while some people accept that it is a separate language, they do not think it necessary to learn it. There are those who count it as a language and know that it is very necessary for the Assamese people, but are absolutely indifferent towards working for its progress. They think that Assamese and Bengali both have their basis in Sanskrit and therefore, if they work for the improvement of Assamese, it would gradually lean towards Bengali and later, become one with it."\(^{34}\)

This succinct summing up of the problems faced by the Assamese language puts one point in focus – the similarity between Bengali and Assamese which led many Bengali thinkers to write about Assamese either in derogatory terms, or to invite Assamese to become one with Bengali. This was not accepted by many among the Assamese intelligentsia. There were a few, of course, who were all for the 'Bengalization' of Assam. Gunābhīrām Bhorā for instance, in an editorial article, 'Bengali' in \(\textit{Oxōm Bondhu},\) March 1885, wrote on the relationship between the two groups of people and

\(^{34}\) \textit{Junāki}, January 1891, Hemsondro Guswami, \'\textit{Diti\text{ô} Adhi\text{ô}xent\text{ô}t Boktitā}\'.

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concluded that the brahāli Babu or Bhādrālok, had become the model for the growing Assamese middle-class. The acculturation that was taking place was a fact, which could not be denied and he gave examples of dress, hair-do, manners and cooking to prove his point that the Assamese were rapidly internalising the Bengali way of life.

But there were some like Lokhīnāth Bezbaruah who were not ready to accept Bengali on any terms. In a speech delivered during the 1895 conference of the Ḍāmbi Bāhārī Unnāti Xādhoni Xābhā he mentions those Bengali critics who having read an Assamese newspaper or four lines of an Assamese poem jump up with joy and declare that Assamese is just a dialect of Bengali. He declares that any sharp-tempered Assamese would answer such critics thus:

"If you are true Indians, true descendents of the Sanskrit-speaking Aryans, then it would have been a matter of shame had you not been able to understand Assamese and we would have called you fools. Without formal training in these languages, do you not understand Hindi and Oriya and Marathi? Our only fault is that the Assamese alphabet is the same as yours. When we see your childishness, we feel that if your alphabet had similarities with the Roman alphabet, you would have said that English, French, German etc. are dialects of Bengali and written articles in your newspapers about it."
Your false arrogance has made you so blind that you do not wish to look into the reasons which made our alphabets similar.35

Along with the linguistic questions regarding the place of Assamese vis-à-vis Bengali, were other more conflictual areas. The polemic between the two languages was in many ways also a fight between the interests of an immigrant and comparatively more advanced middle-class on the one hand and a suppressed indigenous middle-class on the other. The language agitation also grew along with the demand for the material development and utilization of Assam’s local resources and the employment of local talent. The introduction of Bengali in the schools of Assam had seriously hampered the progress of education and had invited protests from many a quarter, chief among them being, Anondoram Dhekial-Phukon.

One of the key outcomes of the language debate was the demand that Bengali-speaking districts should be transferred to Bengal. Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara had been administratively separated from Bengal since 1874 but, the Surma Valley, as it was known, had maintained its cultural and linguistic links with Bengal and the real political partition of 1905 created unforeseen

35 Junâki, April 1895, Lôhînâth Bêzôrônô ‘Xûsthô Adhîbhenônôt Bokti’â’.

‘See Grierson, “Assamese literature is essentially a national product. It always has been national and it is so still. The genius of its people has led it along lines of its own, and its chief glory—history—is a branch of study almost unknown to the indigenous literature of Bengal. Whether the nation has made the literature, or the literature the nation, I know not, but, as a matter of fact, both have been for centuries and are in vigorous existence. Between them they have created a standard literary language which, whether its grammar resembles that of Bengali or not, has won for itself the right to a separate, independent existence.” p.394.
problems. Neither did the Surma valley people want to be attached to Assam and be separated from main land Bengal, nor did the Assamese leaders want new competition from the highly educated, competent and enterprising people from these districts. In 1912, in the face of rising nationalism, the partition of 1905 had to be annulled and East and West Bengal were reunited and Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara were included in the Chief Commissioner’s Province of Assam as Bengali-speaking districts. However the vexed question of sending these districts away to Bengal remained to create agitations and divisions among the people of Assam. Moreover, the continuous influx of immigrants from Mymensing in East Bengal made matters worse and gave a religious dimension to the language issue which became one of the main issues in the Assam Students’ Agitation of the late 1970’s and 80’s.

This chapter had looked as various facets in the campaign towards the particularization of Assamese self-hood. The machinery, which had put the whole structure rolling, had been the rather abstract idea of modernization. The multi-layered question of the Assamese identity was variously evolved and defined by various people who through historical chance happened to reside within the territorial space of Assam. What has to be admitted, however, is that there was hardly ever any consensus on what exactly constituted a homogenous Assamese identity. The clash between identities was a continuous and elaborate process, which kept changing in time as well
as in space. Class, for example, was a marker, which very distinctly summoned up diverse and conflicting Assamese identities. One of the most problematic areas of identity was the way the Assamese middle-class looked at and tried to engineer an identity for the Assamese *advisasis* of the plains. This is what I propose to analyze in the next and concluding chapter.