Chapter 3
Emergence of Ethnic Movement in Assam

This chapter tries to examine the character of the anti-foreigners movement by considering the changes in the social stratification and power relations in Assamese society before and after independence. As often pointed out by many scholars and journalists, the anti-immigrant reactions by the Assamese people can trace its root to the large-scale immigration of people from outside the state, such as Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims and tea-garden labourers, which occurred during the colonial period. However, immigration by itself does not always cause a mass-mobilised movement. In this chapter, I would like to examine why the anti-foreigners movement took place in Assam during this period, and find out the differences with other movements against immigrants in Assam. This will help us understand more clearly why the target of the movement should be “illegal immigrants/foreigners”.

When the anti-foreigners movement started in 1979, it was widely reported by the media and academics not only in Assam and neighbouring West Bengal, but also throughout India. The mass upsurge was regarded as an unusual phenomenon in Indian politics, and people were keen to understand why this kind of movement took place in Assam. It was such an important event in the Indian political scene that it was necessary for journalists in the pan-Indian media to grasp the situation in Assam.6

6 Extract of an interview with ex-journalist pan-Indian newspaper in Delhi, November 2002
Thus, many of the books that were written during or immediately after the movement try to trace its historical roots and see the movement largely as a consequence of large-scale immigration. In this process, intentionally or unintentionally, these writings emphasise the continuity of the movement with the linguistic movements in the 1960s and 1970s, and also with the demands and debates of the colonial period.

In the discussion that follows, I would like to emphasise the particular character of the anti-foreigners movement and the differences which emerged in the Assamese ethnic/national demands by analysing the historical, political and social background of each movement. In particular, I will focus on the way in which the concept 'other' is presented in these movements and analyse the change that took place in the meaning of the concept as well as in the character of the movement.

Two things should be kept in mind. First, there was a considerable change in the political unit called 'Assam' before and after India's independence. In 1947, India gained sovereignty and Assam was one of its federal units. There was a territorial change accompanying partition, the most important being the separation of Sylhet from Assam. After such a great political change, it is difficult to regard the movements which occurred before and after as easily comparable.

Secondly, even after independence or in the post-colonial period, there was a significant difference between the movements that took place in the 1960s and 1970s and those of the 1980s. Whereas the former focused on language, the latter focuses on the foreign nationals. Special attention will be paid to the changes in the character of the movements from the 1960s to the
1. Historical Contexts of the Assamese Nationality: the Colonial Period

As noted in Chapter 2, large-scale immigration to Assam took place during the colonial period. The British officers regarded the former Ahom officials not suitable for the colonial administration, and encouraged immigration in order to manage the colonial administration and to introduce modern industry in Assam. The immigrants played an important role in the incorporation of Assam into the colonial political system and economic structure. At first, the middle-class Bengalis who were already experienced in colonial administration were imported from Sylhet, Dhaka and Mymensingh as colonial functionaries. (Nag 1990: 34-7)

The immigration was not directed to meet the needs of the administration only, but of the other sectors also. As a result, the British colonisation brought about a change in the political, economic and social structure in Assam. In the tea-plantations, a major colonial industry in Assam, the tribes were brought from Orissa and Bihar to work as labourers.

In addition to the administration sponsored officials and plantation workers, there were other economic migrants such as the Marwaris who came from the Indian mainland. The Marwaris acted as moneychangers, bankers, and dealers in rice and grains. They monopolised practically the whole of trade and commerce of Assam and played an important role in opening the state to the Indian market. Even in agriculture, under the name of modernisation, commercialisation took place in order to increase the revenue. Thus, the large-scale immigration of Muslim peasants from East
Bengal was encouraged and they were successful in producing cash crops. (Nag 1990: 39-41)

Initially the Assamese people, who owned enough land and produced sufficient crops for their own needs, did not feel the necessity to adjust to the change in the society. However, when they seek employment in the modern sector they had to experience the hard competition with the immigrants. In this context, the Assamese national sentiment took place in the form of opposition to the immigrants and their dominance in their own land. The first major reaction by the Assamese people, the demand for the adoption of Assamese as the language of administration, occurred in response to the Bengali dominance in administration.

1.1. Language as a Symbol of Distinct Identity

The consciousness of a distinct Assamese nationality began with the colonisation of Assam. The British occupation brought increased interaction with Bengali society. As noted above, the British administration promoted the immigration of an educated section of Bengali officers to Assam. Along with this action, the Bengali language was introduced as a medium in revenue administration and education in schools. The step was aided by the Bengali’s openness to change.

With its encounter with British civilisation, the Bengali society experienced substantial transformation until the time Assam was colonised, and in the cultural realm, it took the form of a ‘Bengali Renaissance’. As a consequence, Bengali culture came to be recognised as the most ‘advanced’ among the native cultures in India, and institutes for higher education were
established in Bengal in order to produce the colonial administrative staff. Thus, the Assamese found themselves to be latecomers to the modernising society in colonial India. To catch up with the civilising process and counter the hegemony of Bengal, the Assamese not only began to promote their language and culture but also emphasised their difference with the Bengalis.

As a first step to achieve this objective a memorandum was submitted to Moffat Mills by Anandaram Dekhiyal Phukan. This act is widely cited as the first attempt to reinstate the Assamese language to its ‘right’ status (for example, see Misra 2001: 19). In the memorandum, Dekhiyal Phukan, who was born to a Brahmin landowner family, educated in the Hindu College of Calcutta and who later became a government servant, categorically stated, that even though a number of vernacular schools had been established in Assam, instruction in these schools was “imparted in a foreign language, viz., the Bengalee, which is but imperfectly understood by the teachers themselves, not to speak of the pupils” (Baruah 1999: 59; Guha 1977: 22). With the help of the American Baptist Mission, a section of the Assamese people lodged a complaint on the issue, and Assamese was introduced as the language of courts and schools, under the Bengal Government Order of 19 April 1873 (Assamese Language, 1882-1977 1951: 42; Guha 1977: 22; Nag 1990: 49-59).

Side by side with this were moves to form organisations for the promotion of Assamese language and literature. Accordingly, in 1872, the Assamese Literary Society was formed in Calcutta at the initiative of the Assamese residents in the city, including students who were studying at the prestigious Presidency College. In 1888, the Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhani
Samiti (ABUSS) was formed, again by the Assamese middle class students in Calcutta. Here, the prime objective was to establish a standard language throughout Assam. Many present day observers view the formation of these literary organisations as the emergence of modern political consciousness in Assam (see for instance Guha 1977: 24; Nag 1990: 113·6; Misra 2001: 19·26).

The influence of Bengali culture at the time was very strong. As noted above, students studying at Calcutta played a pioneering role not only in establishing these literary organisations to which many middle class Assamese extended their support, but also in lighting the flame of Assamese nationality. Being the capital of British India at the time, Calcutta was the nerve centre of cultural activity: hence the emergence of the modern literary movement was called the 'Bengali Renaissance'. Scholars such as Amalendu Guha and Sajal Nag have pointed out these aspects (Guha 1977: 21·4; Nag 1990: 79). Also, Sanjib Baruah concedes this point. But the latter also emphasises the importance of taking note of the feeling of resentment prevalent among the Assamese towards Bengali dominance (Baruah 1999: 60). Thus, we can see that Assamese nationality in the early colonial period was more or less stimulated by the encounter with Bengalis and their culture, with the strong feeling of resentment towards their political, economic and social dominance in the Assamese people's own land.

1·2. Immigrants, Sense of Our Land, and Debates over Line System

In the early 1900s, pressure on land caused by the presence of the large number of Bengali peasants became the main political issue in Assam. As noted earlier, British colonial officers promoted large-scale migration from
Bengal to Assam in order to deal with the problem of land scarcity in Bengal and to increase land revenue in Assam. The process began in the late 19th century, but the large-scale population movement occurred from the 1900s onwards (Baruah 1999: 55-7). Indeed, in the 1931 Census, C. S. Mullan, Superintendent of Census Operation in Assam, had made a prediction about the possible impact of the large presence of the immigrants, especially that of Bengali Muslims on the people of Assam. Mullan's prediction was one of the most quoted phrases at the time of the anti-foreigners movement. I quote:

Probably the most important event in the province during the last twenty-five years
....has been the invasion of a vast horde of land-hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims, from the districts of Eastern Bengal and in particular from Mymensingh.
...It is sad but by no means improbable that in another thirty years Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home. (Census of India, 1931, Volume 3, Assam)

The number of the immigrants kept increasing in the 1930s, and there emerged a growing dissatisfaction and the fear against the Muslim immigrants among the Assamese people. The matter reached its peak in the mid-1930s when the Assamese began to feel the pressure of the Muslim peasants with regards to their rights over land.

In the mid 1930s, there was a controversy between the Hindus and Muslims over the Line System and immigration policy. And, almost at the same time, the British government introduced Provincial autonomy and an election was held for the state legislative assembly under a separate
electorate. Here, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League emerged as prominent political parties in the assembly, and the controversy over the Line System occurred between these two parties. (Kar 1997: 35·8)

The Line System was first proposed in 1916 and introduced in 1920 with a view to protect the local people from land pressure caused by the presence of Bengali Muslim peasants. The idea was to segregate the land reserved for the local people and that reserved for the exclusive settlement of the immigrants. Since the introduction of the system, local people who wanted to reserve the land for the Assamese have complained of the inefficiency of the system and demanded that it be strengthened, while the Muslims demanded its abolition. Expectedly, the former demand was represented by the Congress, and the latter by the Muslim League in the state legislative assembly, and debates arose over several resolutions raised by both parties. (Guha 1977: 208-10, 256-63; Nag 1991: 125·30; Kar 1997: 8·20, 86·92)

In the 1940s, the immigration policy was carried out by the Muslim League ministry led by Saadulla. In particular, in 1942 during his fourth ministry, the Government of India's 'Grow More Food' scheme was put into operation, and under this policy Saadulla tried to increase the land settlement of the migrants. The policy was criticised by the Congress, and even the Viceroy, during his visit to Assam, stated that it actually meant 'Grow More Muslims' policy. (Nag 1991: 125·30; Kar 1997: 8·20, 86·92)

Looking at the controversy over the Line System and immigration policy, it can be said that this period saw the rise to prominence of the sense of 'our land' among a section of the Assamese people. Those people who saw immigrants as a 'threat' to Assam drew a line between the indigenous and
immigrant communities, based on the criteria of colonisation of Assam. The descendants of the population who started to live in Assam before the British occupation were regarded as ‘local, indigenous’ people, while those who started to live in Assam after colonisation were seen as ‘immigrants’ even if they were born in Assam. The important point here is that the dichotomy still has significant meaning in present Assamese society, as noted by Sanjib Baruah. For the first time land and immigration became closely linked, hence the distinction between the local and immigrant communities became important.

1-3. Partition and the Emergence of Assam state

In 1946, the issue of immigration and the Hindu/Muslim confrontation saw a major turn, and the communal situation became more tensed than anything previously experienced. In the year, that the Cabinet Mission Plan was proposed, Assam was grouped with East Bengal and it was proposed that it be transferred to Pakistan. Initially, the leaders of the All India Congress Committee opposed the move, but later on compromised with the plan in order to expedite the process of independence.

However, the leaders of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee led by Gopinath Bordoloi filed a complaint against this plan. Backed by M. K. Gandhi, they led a massive campaign against the transfer to Pakistan. To resolve the matter it was decided that a referendum would be held in the Sylhet district (a district bordering East Bengal, with a predominantly Bengali-Muslim population) and the rest of Assam would remain in India. This compromise formula sealed the fate of Sylhet and it was transferred to
Pakistan in 1947. (Guha 1977: 309·20; Kar 1997: 40; Chakrabarty 2002: 333·5)

Compared to the language problem in the nineteenth century, the campaign against the grouping plan did successfully mobilise the masses and for the first time created a wider social tension among many sections of the people in Assam. Commenting on the situation, Amalendu Guha states, “Never was the communal situation in Assam so tense as in the last year of the British rule.” (Guha 1977: 315·20; Nag 1990: 145·56)

However, after partition and the country’s independence, most of the Bengali Muslim peasants remained in Assam and adopted Assamese as their mother tongue as well as declaring themselves as Assamese speaking to the census enumerators. Thus the issue of religion and the hostility towards the Muslims cooled down considerably.

2. From the Linguistic Movements to the Anti-Foreigners Movements: the Postcolonial Period

The partition and independence of India brought about major changes to Assam’s polity. First of all, the Assamese-speaking population became the majority in Assam for the first time since colonisation. As a result of the referendum, the Sylhet district was separated from Assam and transferred to Pakistan. Sylhet was a densely populated district and its population comprised nearly 30 percent of Assam’s population with more than 90 percent of the population being Bengali-speaking (Census of India 1931). But with the transfer of Sylhet, the percentage of the Assamese population in the state increased from 30 percent to 56 percent (Census of India 1931).
Secondly, partition and the accompanying violence between the Hindus and the Muslims triggered a large-scale influx of refugees. Prior to partition, in 1946, there was a series of riots and mass killings in neighbouring Bengal. In the process, many Hindus and Muslims became refugees and crossed the border, Hindus into India and Muslims into East Pakistan. It has been said that there were many refugees from Sylhet. The 1951 census revealed that there were 275,455 Bengali Hindus who crossed the border into India before and after partition (Census of India 1951).

Lastly, with the formalisation of partition, the East Bengal region was transformed into East Pakistan and became a separate nation-state from India, making the residents there into ‘foreigners’. Thus before independence, the movement of people from the area was regarded as inter-state migration, as Sylhet then was part of the same political unit as the rest of India. However, after partition, whereas the Hindus were regarded as ‘refugees’, the Muslim migrants became ‘illegal immigrants’ or ‘foreigners’. What added to the problem is that even in the post-partition period, migration from East Pakistan into India continued unabated. In particular, at the time of the Bangladesh war of liberation, there was a large-scale movement of population from that country into India.

In the postindependence period, it is unknown whether the immigrants were Hindus or Muslims because there are no official statistics. Scholars as Susanta Krishna Dass states that it was the Hindus who crossed the border.

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7 It has been pointed out that the majority of the Muslims who left India were from north India, and only a small number left east India (Oommen 2002: 136). Especially in case of Assam, as there was no large-scale communal disturbance, there was no record of large-scale population movement of Muslims.
after partition, while the Weiner points out the abnormal increase of Muslim population in *Census of India* from 1951 to 1971 (Dass 1980:850-9; Weiner 1983: 285-6). In a recent research conducted by the scholars in Assam, it has been stated that from 1951 to 1991, there were 2 million illegal immigrants in India from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. (Goswami, Goswami and Saikia 2002)

2.1. Language as a Boundary of Ethnic Communities: the Demand for the Official Language of the State of Assam

In the post-independence period, the demand for the recognition of Assamese as the official language became the central issue in Assam. The Assam Sahitya Sabha, the most influential social organisation in Assam, under the leadership of Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury had raised the demand as early as 1950 (Dutt 1953: 12-3). However, it was not until the end of the 1950s that the demand was taken serious note of by the state legislative assembly. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee passed a resolution on 24th April 1960 that Assamese should be declared the official language of the state. Following this resolution, the Assam Official Language Bill was passed in the legislative assembly on 24th October 1960 (The Assam Official Language Act 1960; Goswami 1999: 50-4).

During this period, the move for the declaration of the official language met with severe opposition from the Bengali and tribal communities particularly from Cachar and the various hill districts in the state, and in June and July 1960 there were a series of violent incidents among linguistic communities. The tense situation continued even after the Bill was passed in
the assembly. The severest opposition came from the Bengali community in Cachar, and on 19th May 1961 there was a violent incident in Silchar (a major town in Cachar) in which eight persons were killed in police firing against the satyagrahis of the strike. In order to contain the situation, the Union Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri came to Cachar for mediation and proposed the amendment of the Act. The assembly accepted the formula offered by Shastri, and passed the amendment to the Language Bill on 7th October 1961. (Goswami 1999: 57, 64-66; Shastri Formula 1961).

At the time, the promoters of the Assamese language defined the Bengali Hindus as a 'threat'. For example, in a pamphlet issued by the Assam Sahitya Sabha, it is stated that:

> Almost all the Muslim immigrants from Bengal have taken Assam as their home and adopted the local ways of life and thinking. ... This has, however, caused a considerable heart-burning amongst the Bengali Hindus who are always labouring hard to inflate the number of Bengali-speaking people in Assam, and therefore, they have tried hard to alienate them from the Assamese people and by constant persuasion and propaganda against Assamese language and its culture have succeeded in changing the medium of teaching from Assamese to Bengali in a considerable number of schools established in the immigrant areas. (Chowdhary 1961: 10)

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8 Shastri formula proposed the following amendments to the Language Bill: 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 to continue to be 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.
As stated earlier in this chapter, there was a predominance of Bengali Hindus in the modern sector of employment in the colonial period. The Bengali Hindu's presence in the administrative services was still significant in the 1950s, and there was dissatisfaction among the Assamese people due to the Bengali dominance. It was articulated during the process of the demand for the official language bill and the disturbances that followed the passing of the bill.

The strong demand for the official language bill by the Assam Sahitya Sabha and other sections of the Assamese society was viewed as an oppressive measure by the tribes in Assam, especially those in the hill areas. This accelerated a demand for a separate hill state by the hill tribes.

The move for the separation of hill areas was not solely a product of the language bill, and there was a move for the separate hill state before the introduction of the bill. For example, in 1955, the Eastern India Tribal Union was formed in order to represent the interests of the hill tribes. However, until the end of the 1950s, not all the hill tribes were in favour of a separate hill state. It was the opposition to the Assamese language bill which helped them to unite on a common platform. (Chaube 1973: 114-20)

In July 1960, the major hill tribes formed the All Party Hill Leader's Conference (APHLC), an all-hills political organisation. It comprised of major political organisations of United Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, Lushai Hills, United Mikir and North Cachar Hills. APHLC passed a resolution condemning the imposition of Assamese language in the hill areas. In November 1960, it demanded 'the immediate creation of a separate Hill State'. (Chaube 1973: 121-3)
The APHLC deputations started their negotiation with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, but they could not come to agreement on the status of the Hill State. Nehru offered the Scottish pattern of government for the hill areas, but the APHLC rejected the proposal on the ground that it was almost a State within a State providing for partial administrative separation without actual political separation. In the following years, there were several recommendations proposed by the central government, but it did not meet the demand of the hill state. During this period, the Mizo delegate to the APHLC decided to demand a separate state for Mizo hills within the Indian Union, and left the APHLC. Also, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills were not so enthusiastic in the demand for the separate hill state. (Chaubé 1973: 124-32; Rao 1976: 374-82)

In 1969, Meghalaya was created as an Autonomous state within the state of Assam comprising the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills district and the Garo Hills district. In 1972, it led to the creation of the states of Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura. At the same time, the Mizo Hills, the former Lushai Hills was elevated to union territories along with North-East Frontier Agencies.

It is important to take note that at this time the Assamese nationality movement had an assimilationist tendency to impose the Assamese language on all the communities in Assam. This continued until the mid-1970s, when the Gauhati University decided to introduce Assamese as the language of

9 In the plan, the regional committee consisting of all the elected member of the Assembly from the autonomous districts was to be formed and the committee was to take care of the affairs on the district. The regional committed should be headed by Hill Minister, and in case there is disagreement between the regional committee and the legislative assembly, the matter should be referred to the Governor. (Rao 1976: 374-5)
education in the colleges under its jurisdiction. The decision brought about fierce opposition again from the Bengali community in Cachar. However, from the end of the 1970s, the nationality movement in Assam took a drastic turn in the opposite direction.

2-2. The Anti-Foreigners Movement

By the end of the 1970s, there was major transformation in the situation in Assam. Until this time, the Assamese language was established as the official language in the state and as a medium of instruction at Gauhati University. Although there were still continuing debates on language, the centre of the focus shifted to the issue of foreign nationals.

It has been pointed out that there was a large influx from erstwhile East Pakistan, and present-day Bangladesh, of Bengali Muslim peasants. As shown earlier in this chapter, this process had generated disquiet in colonial times, too. But this time, the situation had acquired a different complexion as the East Bengal region has become part of a foreign country, and the immigration problem could no longer be viewed as an interstate population movement but a transnational movement.

The problem was raised several times earlier, but the movement received momentum only when the by-election to the Lok Sabha in the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency was announced. At the time, it was found that the number of voters had gone up phenomenally. Soon after, the AASU demanded that the election be postponed and the names of the foreign nationals deleted from the electoral rolls.

To intensify their demand, the AASU coordinated with the Assam
Sahitya Sabha, some regional political parties and a youth organisation, and formed an umbrella organisation called the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) in August 1979. Their objective was to detect the names of the foreigners in the electoral rolls, delete them from the rolls and deport the subject from Assam.

For the AASU, the organisers of the movement, the threat this time was the presence of the 'foreigners', unlike in the 1960s where the threat came from the cultural domination of the 'Bengali Hindus'. Therefore, at that time, the strategy adopted was introduction of one's own national language (Assamese) to counter the threat of the cultural 'other'. This time, however, the threat came from the large influx of 'foreigners' from across the international border. To highlight the danger posed to the demographic structure of the state, the organisers of the movement came up with a number of pamphlets on the sharp increase in the rate of the population based on census figures. In one of their most widely distributed pamphlets, *Voice of AASU: Mass Upheaval in Assam*, they estimated that there were 45 lakhs (4.5 million) foreigners in the state (AASU 1980a: 2). Considering that the population of the state of Assam was 14,625,152 as per the 1971 census, this is a considerable number indeed.

The AASU and AAGSP leaders were very careful to avoid the criticism of being communal, hence took careful step to clearly define who the 'foreigners' are and projected the problem not simply as a local or regional problem but a Constitutional problem of India:

*A foreigner is a foreigner; a foreigner shall not be judged by the language he speaks or*
by the religion he follows. Communal considerations (either religious or linguistic) can not be taken into account while determining the citizenship of a person: the secular character of the Indian Constitution does not allow that. (emphasis original: AASU and AAGSP 1980: 6)

Therefore, when they emphasised the 'threat' caused by the large influx of foreigners, they were careful not to narrate it in terms of cultural, religious or linguistic identity, but in the context of national security. To bolster their argument, the AASU pointed to the Chinese aggression (Indo-China war) in 1962, and alleged that the Pakistan (Bangladesh) based immigrants exhibited tacit support to the aggressors. In their words:

While the indigenous population of Assam and NE [North East] region was preparing for whatever meager resistance they could offer to the Chinese invaders, the flag of Pakistan was openly flown in many places of Assam by the illegal foreigners and their leaders, who were busy making preparations for welcoming the Chinese. (emphasis in original: AASU 1980b: 5)

This, however, does not mean that cultural, religious or linguistic identity have lost their significance in contemporary Assamese society. Although the AASU leaders were careful to avoid couching their claims in a communal tone, some of the organisations that supported the movement were less concerned about the matter and expressed their concern about the threat to Assamese cultural identity posed by the influx of foreigners. For example, in a pamphlet issued by the Guwahati University Teachers'
Association, it was stated:

Since the immigrants from Bangladesh (and former East Pakistan) were largely Muslims, the abnormal rise in the Muslim population in some of these districts (where the rise of population is high) is another clear indication of the fact that the growth rate was unnatural and the result of large-scale migration. (GUTA 1980: 3)

... The immigrants, though belong to two different religious groups, they come from same linguistic clan. ... Another important, but significant feature of these immigrants is that for all practical purposes and even for trifle politico-social gains, these two diverge religious groups of immigrants combine on grounds of linguistic affinity at opportune time to create regional tension and bitterness. (GUTA 1980: 34)

It should be noted here that the GUTA was one of the organisations that closely sympathised with the AASU, and in fact, some of its members were in the frontline of the movement.

There are several implications that could be inferred from the statements made by the student leaders. First of all, there is a clear connection between the language movements of the 1960s and 70s and the anti-foreigners movement in terms of the leadership and its direction towards the preservation of Assamese identity. However, we can also see that there was a major change in the strategy adopted by the leaders of the movements. In the latter movement, the issue of language was kept out, and the students staked their claims primarily on the basis of population statistics and constitutional rights. In this sense, the AASU was making a serious bid to present a secular and constitutionally legitimate claim.
At the same time, as shown in the GUTA's pamphlets, there were also people who defined the problem in the context of language and on religious grounds. Here we can see the influence of past events on the anti-foreigners movement in Assam. For many people who have experienced the language problem and disturbances in the 1960s and 70s, the newly framed anti-foreigners movement was simply a continuation of the same struggle.

So far, I have analysed the difference between two major nationality movements in postcolonial Assam, viz, the linguistic movements and the anti-foreigners movement. In the case of the language movement in the 1960s and 70s, Bengali speaking people—especially the Bengali Hindus—were tagged as the ‘other’.

At the time of the anti-foreigners movement, however, the category 'other' shifted from the cultural category 'Bengal Hindus' to the political category ‘foreigners’. This way they tried to legitimise the claim by pointing out the fact that there is a large-scale influx of population into Assam. Based on the abnormal increase of the population in Assam, the movement leaders tried to emphasise the gravity of the problem. At the same time, in order to avoid the communal tone in their official claims, they did not target any linguistic or religious groups.

2.3. Middle-Class Movement to Mass-Mobilised Movement
Apart from the target of the movement, there are several important changes between the linguistic movements and the anti-foreigners movement. One particular character of the latter is that the leaders were successful in encouraging the participation of the masses. It should be noted that the
linguistic movements were basically middle-class movement. The demand for Assamese as the official language of the state was raised by the Assam Sahitya Sabha, which is the association of the literary organisation and comprised of the Assamese speaking middle-class. Moreover, the movement on the medium of instruction in the Gauhati University was led by student organisations. The linguistic issue was not only cultural and it was also related to the employment issues, but only limited to jobs in the state administration. Therefore it was related primarily to the educated classes. It was same in the case of the movement on the medium of instruction in the universities, the masses or the rural peasants were indifferent to the matter.

Contrary to the language movements, the leaders of the anti-foreigners movement were successful in mobilising the masses. For example, in a satyagraha, in November 1979 nearly 700,000 in the city of Guwahati and estimated 2 million people in the state as a whole courted arrest. In the oil blockade in Duliajan, as many as 12,000 people participated in picketing. The blockade continued from 27th December 1979 to 18th January 1980 until the state administration used the police force to disperse them. Commenting on this situation, Hiren Gohain wrote, ‘The agitation over the presence of so-called “foreign nationals” has grown into a massive movement, bringing out into the streets hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women...’ (Gohain 1980: 418)

There are two totally opposite views on the success of the mass mobilisation. Many people in Assam interpreted it as a success of the movement leaders to represent the interest of the masses including the rural peasants and the tribes. However, some people who opposed the movement,
particularly the Marxists, insisted that the peasants and the tribes were utilised by the Assamese upper class to secure their own interest. For example, as noted in Introduction, Gohain was of the view that it was the Assamese ruling elite who used the ‘cudgel of chauvinism’ and beat the non-Assamese working class by inspiring the Assamese peasantry with dream of refurbished ‘national’ glory (Gohain 1980a: 420).

Moreover, Amalendu Guha argued that the current anti-foreigners movement is “gentry nationalism” and not “peasant nationalism” in his long paper published in Economic and Political Weekly (Guha 1980: 1705-9). Refuting the claim made in the above lines, Udayon Misra asserted that earlier, Guha himself acknowledged the fact that the clash of interests involved the peasants and tribals. To quote:

That the clash of interests was not confined to the Asamiya rich peasantry and the immigrants but also involved the urban middle class and the peasant masses is amply substantiated by Guha himself. “If the immigration continued unrestrained, would not the Assamese be turned into a linguistic minority in their own homeland – the Brahmaputra valley? This was the question which plagued the mind of not only its urban middle classes, but also the peasant masses. (Guha 1978: 205-6)”(Misra 1981: 291)

On this point, Guha replied back that the peasants were ‘misguided’ by the rural gentry.

If the force of nationalism behind the current anti-foreigner agitation is “gentry nationalism”, how to explain the involvement of the peasantry, including those of tribal
origin? We have already partially answered this. It may be added that acute economic stagnation, with the growing problems of indebtedness, landlessness and unemployment, is at the root of the general discontent. Peasants' discontent and their desire for increased autonomy has been exploited by vested interest and given a chauvinist twist. Ignorant, conservative and backward peasants have been misguided by the rural gentry. Instead of uniting the toilers of all communities, linguistic and religious, in a common anti-feudal, anti-monopoly struggle the movement has divided them on the basis of communalism and divisive slogans. (Guha 1981: 782)

This point is fundamental in arguing the character of the anti-foreigners movement. It will be discussed later in this thesis, especially through the discussions in Chapter 5, 6 and 7 where we examine the narratives of the urban middle-class and the rural peasants. Thus it is prudent to briefly introduce the important points which should be noted when we consider the participation of the rural peasants.

One of the reasons for the success of the mobilisation of the masses in the movement is that there was a demand for the deportation of the foreigners which would relate to the issue of land, a major concern of the peasants. At the time of the movement, the Bengali Muslim immigrants were the numerically biggest group who were perceived as the illegal 'foreigners'. They were mainly peasants who held vast tracts of land in lower and middle part of Assam. If the movement would be successful and the demand for the deportation of the foreigners would be fulfilled, the land they owned would have been abandoned. Thus, the major demand of the anti-foreigners movement was related to the issue of land, which drew attention of the rural
peasants. In fact, there were peasants who were told by the movement leaders that the land of the 'foreigners' would be given to them if they joined the movement.

This was especially a crucial issue for the plains tribes such as the Bodos and the Tiwas. The plains tribes in Assam once had a vast tract of land, but now they have lost most of their traditional land. Many of the lands were settled by the Bengali Muslim immigrants. After India's independence, the tribal belts and blocks were created by the Government Order in order to reserve the land for the tribes and prohibit non-tribal peoples to acquire the land in the tribal area. However, in many tribal belts and blocks, the system failed to function and the tribes gradually lost their land to the immigrants.

The AASU and the AAGSP seized the issue and drew public attention to the problem of alienation of tribal land. It was perhaps for the first time that the mainstream Assamese had seriously taken note of the matter. In the pamphlet issued in 1983, the AASU summed up the problem as follows.

The problem has badly hit the tribal population. All the 37 Blocks and Belts reserved for the tribal people are on the verge of extinction. Pressure on economy has reduced the sizes of the reserved tribal blocks. Forest resources are fast disappearing due to indiscriminate felling of trees and occupation of the area by the foreign nationals.

(AASU 1983a: 22)

The focus on the issue of land alienation of tribes by the movement leaders may be the main reason why the tribes supported the movement. At the same time, the movement leaders made a controversial demand of deporting the
foreigners from the government reserved land. They alleged that many foreigners illegally occupied the government reserved forest, and emphasised the need for the eviction of the illegal encroachers. Given that many tribal people also settled in the government forest along with the immigrants the demand invited the opposition of a section of the plains tribes.

The case was especially serious in the Gohpur area, where the Bodos and the Assamese people had a long-standing conflict over the government land. In Gohpur reserved forest, the Bodo peasants had settled there and cut the forest. The government officials had evicted them with the help of the non-tribal Assamese, and later allotted the same lands to the latter. This led to the Gohpur incident in 1983, in which the Assamese people were killed by the Bodos.

Moreover, in 1985, when the central government and the AASU came to an agreement, there was one clause (clause 10) regarding the government land and the tribal belts and blocks in the Memorandum of Settlement (popularly known as the Assam Accord). I quote:

> It will be ensured that relevant laws for prevention of encroachment on government land and lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced. Unauthorised encroachers will be evicted under such laws. It will be ensured that relevant laws restricting acquisition of immovable properties by foreigners in Assam will be strictly enforced. (The Assam Accord, 1985)

This clause invited ambivalent responses from the tribes. Although the protection of the tribal belts and blocks was welcomed by the plains tribes,
the demand for eviction from the government land has serious implications for many of the tribal people who illegally cut the forest and resided there.

Moreover, in another clause (clause 6), it was emphasised that the central government would take special measures to the protection of cultural, social and linguistic identity of the Assamese people, and there was no mention on the tribal culture and identity.

Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards as may be appropriate will be provided to protect the cultural, social and linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people. (*The Assam Accord, 1985*)

Thus, the AASU and the AAGSP were successful to mobilise the plains tribes in the first phase of the movement, but in the end, they failed to recognise their social, cultural and economic needs. These are some of the examples to be noted when we consider the relationship between the tribes and the movement leaders, and their representation of the interest of the rural masses.

It should be noted here that although the movement was successful in gaining the mass support, there existed some differences in the interest and the concern of the urban middle-class and the rural peasants. For the middle-class people, the movement was concerned with their identity, political hegemony and employment, whereas for the rural peasants, the main issue was their land and livelihood.

However, we should also note that it was for the first time after independence that the people in Assam experienced such a large-scale
movement which involved the rural peasants. Through participating in the movement, the rural masses came to know the importance of the idea of nationality in relation to the issues which affect their lives, such as land alienation. It may be the first time too that they are introduced to the idea that the Muslim immigrants are ‘bideshi’, or foreigners. The idea that they are the original inhabitants of the land and hence they have the right to own the land, whereas the immigrants are ‘foreigners’ who have no legal or political rights and therefore should be evicted, must have had a great impact on the rural peasants.

On the other hand, when the movement leaders did not meet the economic and political aspirations of the plains tribes, their disappointment became much deeper than before. As will be shown in the later chapters, this constitutes one of the most important causes for the influential movements by the plains tribes today. Thus, the impact of the movement to the rural peasants has multiple dimensions. It is prudent to pay attention to the peasants’ own interests and their subjective activity when considering the issue of ‘mass-participation’ in the movement.

3. The Number of ‘Foreigners’
3-1. The Fear of Minoritisation of the Assamese
As introduced in chapter 1, ethnic mobilisation is activated when nationalities perceive a threat to their identity through external interventions or exogenous forms (Nongbri 2003: 95). In case of Assam, both in the linguistic movements and the anti-foreigners movement, the movement leaders saw the threat posed by the category ‘other’. However, in
the latter movement, the threat was perceived to be greater than in the former, since the Assamese feared that they would lose the majority status through the large-scale influx of foreigners.

The claim of becoming minority in their own state seems to be exaggerated by the movement leaders. However, if we take a close look at the situation in many countries, it is not very rare that an ethnic group becomes minority in their own land. For example, T. K. Oommen points to several cases where the original inhabitants of a territory became a minority group. He uses the term 'ethnification' of nationals to refer to such minoritisation of a group. According to him, the ethnicity implies dislocation from one's original country, region or nation, that is, homeland. However, he argues that ethnification can occur even which a nationality continues to be in its ancestral or adopted homeland. There are cases that nationals can be 'ethnified' by transforming the original inhabitants of a territory into a minoritised and marginalised collectivity. For example, if colonisers have become nationals in the New World (Americas, Australia, etc.), the natives, that is the nationals of the New World (American Indians, Australian aborigines) have been ethnified. (Oommen 1997: 13-5, 2002: 172)

The argument made above is in the context of the New World, but he suggests that such process can happen even in the Old World. For example, Tripura, a neighbouring state of Assam, was engulfed by Bengali migrants following the partition riots, and now the Bengali-speaking people constitute the majority population. Oommen does not refer to the case of Tripura in terms of ethnification, but he admits that the Bengalis became a cultural insider not only in their ancestral homeland Bengal but also in Tripura, their
adopted homeland. And the tribal people in Tripura are turned into a minority group. (Oommen 2002: 172)

He also argues that in case of Fiji, the resistance to the minoritisation and the struggle for the nationalisation take place between two communities, viz. the native Fijians and the Fiji Indians. The native Fijians constitutes 46 percent of the population, but 54 percent of the seats in the House of Representatives are allocated to them, and only native Fijians can hold the office of President or Prime Minister. In contrast, the Fiji-Indians, who constitute around 50 percent of the population are not allowed to own land and even though they are much more successful in achieving higher education preferences are given to the native Fijians in public employment. (Oommen 1997: 109-11)

Such situation arises due to the policy preference for the native Fijians which took place when in 1987 the slogan 'Fiji for Fijians' was invoked, and the democratically elected government was overthrown by the military (Oommen 1997: 111). Oommen states that in Fiji, the natives are asserting their national status and resisting ethnification, while the immigrants are struggling to transform their ethnic status into a national one. (Oommen 1988: 336)

Returning to the anti-foreigner's movement in Assam, we can find some similarity in the case with situations in Tripura and Fiji. Assam experienced large-scale influx of immigrants from erstwhile East Pakistan/Bangladesh as in the case of Tripura. As Tripura is geographically close to Assam, the people in the state could have felt the acute threat of becoming a minority as the Tripuris are reduced to in Tripura. Moreover, as in case of Fiji, the
immigrants (Bengali Hindus) who were brought to the region by the colonial administration were economically more successful than the native Assamese.

Of course, by the time the anti-foreigner's movement erupted in the 1970s, the Assamese constituted the demographic majority in the state, so their situation was not totally synonymous with that of Fiji and Tripura. But if we consider that in the colonial period, the Assamese were demographically and economically a minority in their own state, their fear of ‘minoritisation’ is not groundless, although there may be some exaggeration in the movement leaders' claims.

With the influx of the foreigners from across the border that accompanied the liberation of Bangladesh, the threat perception assumes a new reality hence the number of the foreigners was one of the main focus of the arguments by the movement leaders. However, there were several difficulties in estimating the number of foreigners, as there is no official statistics on the ‘illegal immigrants’ – contributing to the polarisation in the debate not only on the existence of the foreigners but also on the legitimacy of the movement.

3-2. The Increase of Population in Assam: Census Analysis

Many scholars point out that there has been an abnormal population increase in Assam in the decades following independence. At the time of the anti-foreigners movement various arguments were advanced on the cause of the increase. Below, I will examine the statistics from the Indian Census and highlight some of the key arguments on the number of foreigners.
Table 8. The Growth of Population in Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>Percentage of increase in Assam</th>
<th>Percentage of increase in India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>3,290,000</td>
<td>..........</td>
<td>......</td>
<td>......</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>3,849,000</td>
<td>559,000</td>
<td>16.99%</td>
<td>5.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>4,637,000</td>
<td>788,000</td>
<td>20.47%</td>
<td>0.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>5,561,000</td>
<td>924,000</td>
<td>19.92%</td>
<td>11.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>6,694,000</td>
<td>1,133,000</td>
<td>20.37%</td>
<td>14.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>8,029,000</td>
<td>1,335,000</td>
<td>19.94%</td>
<td>13.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>10,837,000</td>
<td>2,808,000</td>
<td>34.97%</td>
<td>21.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>14,625,000</td>
<td>3,788,000</td>
<td>34.95%</td>
<td>24.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>19,100,000</td>
<td>4,475,000</td>
<td>44.75%</td>
<td>20.60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures of 1981 is estimates, as census was not taken in 1981 in Assam.

(Source: Census of India 1971, Dass 1980: 851)

The census statistics show that the total population of Assam was 8,029,000 in 1951, 10,837,000 in 1961 and 14,625,000 in 1971. The growth rate of 1951 to 1961 is 34.98 percent and 1961 to 1971 is 34.95 percent respectively. If we compare the growth rate with the all India average, which is 21.64 percent and 24.80 percent respectively, the percentage is much larger in Assam. (see Table 3-1)

In 1981, the census was not taken in Assam as the movement leaders were opposed to its enumeration. There are, however, several estimates available on the population of Assam during the period. For example, Myron Weiner cites it as 19.9 million (Weiner 1983: 286, 291). Susanta Krishna Dass calculates the population on the basis of the 1979 figures and estimates—

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it to be 19.1 million. Even if we take the smaller of the two numbers, the population growth rate of 1971-1981 would be 44.75 percent. (Dass 1980: 851)

Based on the census statistics, the AASU leaders calculated that there were at least 4.5 million foreigners in Assam. In a pamphlet circulated by the Union, it stated:

A conservative estimate of the infiltrators number over 45 lakhs of whom over 15 lakhs have entered their names in the electoral rolls, thus causing serious demographic imbalances. ...

National Average for population increase per decade – 22%. Adding a 22% increase for the decade, the population of Assam which was 10,837,329 in 1961 should have been 11,950,149 in 1971 but the actual figure recorded in 1971 is 14,625,152!

The excess population in Assam over the national figures come to 2,675,003 (26 lakhs). Thus in 1971 itself Assam had an abnormal growth to the tune of 26 lakhs! Projected to 1980, the increase in excess of normal limits shall be of order of 51,647,740. (51 lakhs!)

(AASU 1980a: 2-3)

The AASU leaders attributed most of the excess increase in population to the influx from foreign countries. As they did not consider migration from other parts of India and the natural growth rate, their estimate of 4.5 million could be an exaggeration. However, it is a fact that at the time, there was an abnormal increase in the population of Assam and the movement leaders had reason to believe that they were engulfed by immigrants.

3.3. Difficulty in Estimating the Number of ‘Foreigners’
Although the abnormal growth of population in Assam is a fact supported by the census data, it has always been difficult to estimate the exact number of foreigners who came into India. As most of them came as illegal migrants, there are no official statistics on their number. Therefore, many estimates of the number of foreigners emerged at the time.

There were several works to counter the figure on the foreigners' influx cited by the movement leaders. As the abnormal population growth in Assam is clear, critics pointed out the other causes such as the increase in the natural growth rate or the influx of refugees (not 'foreigners') for the population increase or the fact that the immigrants are assimilated to the Assamese society, so they cannot be seen as a threat in Assam.

Susanta Krishna Dass, a demographer of Bengali origin, pointed out three causes for the high rate of increase in Assam's population from 1951. They are a) the natural rate of increase; b) influx of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan and c) heavier migration of Indians from the rest of the country. Dass examined the census data and concluded that the apprehensions about 'infiltration' of Bangladeshi or East Pakistani Muslims into Assam appear not to be supported by the empirical fact. (Dass 1980: 850-9)

Amalendu Guha, a historian and another scholar of Bengali origin, argued that the number of foreigners would be no more than 1.3 millions. He stated:

It appears, as per our quick estimates, that the number of post-1951 settlers with questionable citizenship status would in no case exceed 13 lakhs by any measure and that the number of persons born in Pakistan (including Bangladesh) and enumerated in
Assam shows a declining trend over the period 1951-1971. (Guha 1980: 1710)

Moreover, Guha confidently asserted, Bengali Muslim immigrants are already assimilated or on their way to assimilation.

At the time of the movement, these criticisms on the exaggerations of the numbers often came from Bengali scholars. What is a matter of concern is that rather than encouraging a serious debate on the foreigner's issue, the arguments advanced by the critics were taken as another attempt of the Bengalis to protect migrants of common origin. The issue of division between the Assamese and the Bengalis is discussed in Chapter 4, 5 and 6, but it should be noted that there is a serious disagreement between the two communities, and it starts from the basic points such as the number and the definition of foreigners.

Recently, there has been a summary report, 'Migration to Assam: 1951-1991', produced by the Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development (OKDISCD). The aim of the report is to provide a scientific explanation of the growth of population in Assam during 1951 to 1991. The report is based on census population data and S. R. S. (Sample Registration System) estimates of fertility and mortality rates. It estimates the total international migrants between the years 1951 to 1991 to be 1,983,755 persons, and among them, the number of illegal foreign migrants to be nearly 1.3 million (Goswami, Goswami and Saikia 2002). If we accept the estimate of the report, then the number of the illegal migrants is much less than that claimed by the AASU, but still it is a considerable number.
3-4. The Issue of Cut-Off Year: 1951 or 1971?

Another factor that added to the confusion over the size and issue of foreign infiltration was the disagreement on the cut-off year between the AASU leaders and the Central government. The AASU demanded that 1951 should be the cut-off year for the identification and deportation of the foreign nationals, while the Central government did not accept the demand and instead suggested 1971 as the alternative.

Based on the Constitution and other acts such as *The Citizenship Act, 1955*, and *The Immigrant (Expulsions from Assam) Act 1950*, the AASU argues:

Under Article 5 of the Constitution of India no person who did not have domicile in India at the commencement of the Constitution could be a citizen of India. Thus under this provision all persons who came to India after Jan. 26th 1950 could not be citizens of India. But Article 11 gave power to the Parliament to make law for the acquisition of citizenship by birth, descent, registration or naturalization. Thus a person entering India after Jan. 26th 1950 and did not acquire citizenship under any of the provision of the Indian Citizenship Act, 1955, remained a foreigner. (AASU 1980: 12)

Further, the AASU proposed that the National Register of Citizens for Assam, a document prepared by the census enumerators from the census slips of 1951, should be used as the basis for ascertaining the identity of migrants who came after 1951. (AASU 1980: 12)

On the other hand, the Government of India proposed March 1971 as the cut-off date, on the ground that Bangladesh gained independence that year.
The Congress party, the ruling party at the Centre at the time, had depended for much of its support in Assam on the Bengali Muslims, and they were reluctant to accept the demand to deport them. As the government was ready to accept other major demands, it was because of this issue that a stalemate between the AASU and the government ensued.

The disagreements over the cut-off year were not resolved until the end of the movement in 1985, when the AASU accepted the Assam Accord which states the cut-off year as 1971. Thus, during the movement, there was no consensus between the government of India and the movement leaders on the definition of foreigners.

Moreover, there was some ambiguity about the status of the Hindu immigrants who crossed the border into India after 1950. The Immigrant (Expulsions from Assam) Act 1950 implicitly distinguished Hindu refugees and Muslim illegal aliens. Although the law was repealed in 1957, it has been revealed that there was a secret administrative order from the government of India in 1965 which instructed that East Pakistani minorities, that is Hindus settled in India for more than six months, could be granted citizenship by a District Magistrate following some very easy procedures (Baruah 1999:119).

Thus, there has been a belief among Bengali Hindus who came to India from Pakistan that they should be treated as refugees and given citizenship. However, the Assamese people did not accept this view, and the movement leaders defined foreigners irrespective of religion. This is another example of the division between the Assamese and the Bengalis on the issue of immigration.
4. Violence Towards Muslims

The analysis of the movement leaders' claims in the 1960s and 1980s reveals that the rhetoric used by the Assam movement leaders' had undergone significant transformation. This becomes clear in the change that came about in the way in which they shift the definition of the 'enemy' from 'Bengali Hindus' to 'foreigners'. The leaders of the anti-foreigners movement sought to define the 'foreigners' in a legally and constitutionally legitimate form, and they have remained consistent in their claims that it was the 'foreigners' who should be deported from Assam.

However, in the later phase of the movement, the Bengali Muslims emerged as the main constituent of the category 'foreigner', in other words the significant 'other'. This was especially true during the state legislative assembly election in 1983. Of course, this was not explicitly expressed by the movement leaders, but the anti-Muslim tendency was so obvious that many Assamese Muslims, who supported the movement in the first phase, turned against the movement. As a result, several important Assamese Muslim student leaders left the AASU.

In Assam's history, violence between the Hindu and Muslim communities, the so-called 'communal riots', was not very common. As pointed out in chapter 2, in Assam the important ethnic marker usually appears between 'indigenous' and 'immigrant' communities. However, in the 1983 election the Muslims became the target of violence. The anti-Muslim tendency was so prominent that a section of the Assamese Muslim students alleged the involvement of the RSS force, and they subsequently left the AASU. Although the main target was immigrant Muslims and there were no
large-scale violence against the Assamese Muslims, the latter also felt in
danger of becoming the target of violence. In the arguments that follow, I
would like to draw attention to the emergence of the anti-Muslim communal
violence in Assam and its political background.

4.1. 'Sons of the Soil': Analysis of Nativist Movement by Myron Weiner
To gain a better theoretical understanding of the problem, let us take a look
at the works of Myron Weiner. The scholar in question, an American Political
Scientist, argues this point by analysing both the linguistic and
anti-foreigners movements in Assam. He describes the linguistic movements
as one of the nativist movements in India in his book, *Sons of the Soil*, which
was published in 1978 just before the movement started.

He conducted a comparative analysis of the nativist movements in India
and calls them movements by 'sons of the soil'. He finds close similarity with
the movements that occurred in postcolonial states such as Malaysia,
Uganda and Indonesia where large-scale immigration took place during the
colonial period. He surveyed the social stratification of each immigrant group,
and concludes that the competition between the emerging middle-class of the
sons of the soil and the middle-man minority caused ethnic tension in these
areas. (Weiner 1978)

Weiner refers to theories of ethnic conflict, such as, 'dual labor market' by
Michael Hechter and 'ethnic division of labor' or 'middle-man minority' by
Edna Bonacich. He lists three major conditions under which competition
among communities takes place. First, the ethnic division of labor between
migrants (and their descendants) and non-migrants parallels class
relationships that ordinarily have a high conflict potential. Second, the local population seeks access to occupations that they previously did not seek or from which they were once excluded. Weiner argues that when the local population produces its own educated class, which aspires to move into jobs held by the migrants, then the middle-class nativist movements tend to happen. Third, a change in the power structure stimulates competition by giving one group the political resources for modifying or transforming the ethnic division of labor. (Weiner 1978: 7-8)

He uses the examples of countries such as Malaysia, Burma, and Uganda as well as provincial states like Assam and Maharashtra in India to support his argument. In most areas, large-scale immigration took place during the colonial period. In the case of Assam, we have already discussed this in Chapter 2. There were large groups of poverty-stricken tribals taken from Orissa, Bihar and Bengal as tea-plantation labourers by the colonial power. There were educated Bengalis who were brought in to perform administrative jobs. There were Bengali Muslims who were lured to Assam for cultivation and for increase of the state revenue. There were Marwaris who engaged in trade and played an important role in opening Assam to the economic system of north India.

In short, immigrants played an important role when Assam was incorporated into the colonial economic, industrial and political system. As a result, the employment in the modern sectors that came up with colonisation was dominated by the immigrants. Viewed thus, it would not be wrong to say that only by introducing large-scale immigration was the colonisation of Assam enabled.
Among the immigrants, the Marwaris and the middle-class Bengalis (mostly Hindus) were socially and economically successful. They were the main competitors of the emerging Assamese middle-class, and these groups were the main targets of riots during the 1960s and the 1970s. They were the ones who did not accept Assamese as their mother tongue or medium of instruction, and hence became targets in the linguistic movement.

The Breakdown in the Assamese-Bengali Muslim Coalitions: Demographic and Political Approach

In 1983, soon after the election violence broke out in Assam, Myron Weiner wrote an article titled “The Political Demography of Assam’s Anti-Immigrant Movement”. In this paper, Weiner highlights the change in the object of the Assamese movement.

First, he points out that from the time of independence until 1977, there was an ‘unspoken coalition’ between the Assamese and the Bengali Muslims. The Bengali Muslims even went to the extent of declaring to census enumerators that Assamese was their native tongue, and voted for the Assamese-dominated Congress party. The reason for this behaviour, Weiner argues, was that the Bengali Muslims feared that they could be expelled from the country. Thus, he states, “In an effort to dissuade the Assamese from taking these steps, Bengali Muslims sided with the Assamese on issues that mattered to them, by declaring their mother tongue as Assamese, accepting the establishment of primary and secondary schools in Assamese, supporting the government against Bengali Hindus on the controversial issue of an official language for the state and for the university, and casting their votes
Weiner sees 1977 as the turning point in Assamese-Bengali relations. The Assamese turned against the Bengali Muslims for both demographic and political reasons. There was an influx of illegal Bengali Muslims from erstwhile East Pakistan and Bangladesh. In the 1971 census, it was reported that there was a great increase in the Muslim population. Moreover, the civil war in East Pakistan in 1971 and the 1972 war between India and Pakistan again caused the population to increase, and Weiner concludes that there was immigration of 1.8 million into Assam from 1971 to 1981. This led to the renewed fear among the Assamese that they would become a minority in their own state.

Moreover, in 1977, the Congress Party split into two factions in Assam, as elsewhere in India. As a consequence, in the March 1978 election, for the first time after the country's partition, the Congress party failed to win a majority in the state assembly. This split within Congress ended the post-independence coalition of the Assamese Hindus and the Bengali Muslims. Some Bengali Muslims shifted their support to other parties such as the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The two parties (the CPI and CPI(M)) increased their seats in the election and combined together, they held 16 seats. Many Assamese, however, regarded the Communist parties as synonymous with the Bengalis because of the dominant pro-communist vote in both West Bengal and Tripura.

Myron Weiner's analysis illustrates well the political background of the anti-foreigners movement, particularly the change in Assamese-Bengali Muslim relations.
4·2. 1983 violence: The Muslims as a Significant Other

At the end of 1982, the government of India declared that it would hold an election for the state legislative assembly without making any revision of the electoral roles. The AASU and other movement leaders firmly opposed the decision, but the government was unwilling to withdraw it, despite there being warnings about the outbreak of violence. Violence took place throughout Assam, and more than three thousand people — mostly Bengali Muslims — were killed. (Baruah 1999: 132)

Most of the violence took place between the supporters and the opponent of the elections. Although the AASU was successful in mobilising the masses in rural areas, Bengali Muslims and the Bodo tribes supported the implementation of the election. Sanjib Baruah states, 'the attitude towards the election — whether one voted in the election or boycotted it — seemed to define who the 'allies' and the 'enemy' were (Baruah 1999: 132).

In this process, the Bengali Muslims emerged as an 'enemy', since in terms of number they were the largest group to support the election. At this point, the term 'bideshi (foreigners) became synonymous with 'miyas' (Muslims) or 'Mymensynghias' (people who originally migrated from Mymensyngh district in East Bengal).

As argued earlier in this section, clashes between Hindus and Muslims were rare in Assam. However, at the pan-Indian level, this is the most popular cause of riots. In fact, Muslims are often defined as an 'enemy community' of 'India'. Partition and the creation of Pakistan, several wars
between India and Pakistan, and frequent clashes at the border in Kashmir easily lead to the notion that Pakistan is the enemy country, and Muslims are the enemy community. Gyan Pandey raises the question “Can a Muslim be an Indian?” in his book on partition. He states that nations are established by constructing a core or mainstream – the essential, natural, soul of the nation, as it is claimed. In case of India, the core is ‘Hindu’. They are the majority, a unity that is attached to India beyond doubt. Indeed, to many people in India, the terms ‘Hindu’ and ‘Indian’ are synonymous.

On the other hand, Muslims, many of who had fled to Pakistan a country they attained after a long time of struggle by the Muslim League, are always under suspicion even if they are loyal citizens in India. Pandey notes, “The ‘Muslims’ – that blanket, undifferentiated category – had been too much involved in the Muslim League demand for Pakistan”. Commenting on the construction of Indian nationalism at the moment of partition and independence, he states:

Many elaborations of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ of Indian nationalism during the late 1940s served to reinforce the conceptual split between the Hindu/Indian on the one hand, and the Muslim/foreigner on the other. Occasionally, this was presented as a division between the ‘majority’ and the ‘minorities,’ as in numerous Constituent Assembly speeches on the ‘generosity’ of the majority towards the minorities. The easy, almost invisible, construction of the Hindus as the real Indians, and the others – especially the Muslims, who, as we have seen, stood particularly under the sign of a question mark – as communities on trial, is to be found in other kinds of nationalist statement as well. (Pandey 1999: 621)
This tendency continues today. Oommen argues that religious groups such as Christians, Muslims and Sikhs are perceived as the other, but Muslims are most easily targeted as an ‘enemy’. He states,

There is a hierarchy of the Other in India. The ‘alien’ religious collectivity which also claims to be a political community becomes the most despised and/or feared Other as exemplified in the case of the Muslims in India. (Oommen 2002:121)

Returning to the analysis of the situation in Assam in 1983, the Bengali Muslim peasants were perceived as the ‘other’ in two ways. While they were the immigrant community, they were the religious ‘other’ as well. As argued earlier, in Assam, the distinction between the indigenous and the immigrant has been the most important ethnic marker. However, in the 1983 election, based on their support of the election, the Bengali Muslims became the prominent ‘enemy’. The anti-Muslim tone was so strong that the indigenous Assamese Muslims, who identify themselves as part of the Assamese nationality and distinguish themselves as different from the immigrant Muslims, turned against the movement.

The issue of the Assamese Muslims will be discussed again in Chapter 6. After the movement, until now there have been no large-scale clashes between Hindus and Muslims in Assam, and it seems that Assamese Muslims are again well integrated in the Assamese nationality. However, the issue of the foreigners’ influx is still a major issue in Assam, and there is a growing concern over the increase in the Muslim population.
Concluding Remarks

This chapter analysed the historical contexts of the Assamese nationality movements and their transformation over time. The consciousness of the Assamese nationality emerged under the shadow of British colonisation, and found expression in the friction with middle-class Bengali officers, the issue of land settlement of immigrant Muslims, and the proposal of transfer to Pakistan.

In the postcolonial period, the promoters of the Assamese nationality found that they were the majority in the newly formed provincial state. Here, competition with the middleman minorities, mainly middle-class Bengalis but sometimes including Marwaris, occurred in the fields of politics and economic activity. The most prominent one was the demand for the official language.

The linguistic movement was very active throughout independent India in the 1950s and 1960s. As elsewhere in India, Assam's linguistic movement was not merely a cultural demand, but was a competition to decide the ruling section of the provincial states. Through the adoption of the official language bill, Assamese became the official language and middle-class Assamese attained the ruling position in the state.

Compared to the linguistic movement, the anti-foreigners movement had a considerably different character. At this time, the large number of immigrants caused the Assamese to fear that there would be a great demographic change in the state. They feared that they would be a minority in their homeland. This was the largest turning point of the postcolonial
movement in Assam.

Also, in the anti-foreigners movement, the movement leaders could gain the mass support by highlighting the issue of land. This is a significant change when we compare it with the linguistic movements in the 1960s and the 1970s, which was the struggle between the local middle-class elite and the middle-man minorities. Since the deportation of the foreigners, particularly the Muslim peasants of Bengali origin, was related to the issue of land, many rural peasants including the tribes took part in the movement.

The change in the aim of the movement led to the change in the target of the violence. In the 1960s, the target of the riots was Bengali Hindus and the Marwaris. However, in the anti-foreigners movement, mainly the immigrant Muslims became the victims. Just before the election in 1983, the communities in Assam were split on the issue of boycott of the election. The Assamese people tried to prevent the Muslims to cast their votes, and violence broke out between these two communities. Through the experience of the violence the boundary between 'we' and 'they' ('self' and 'other') was re-demarcated and strengthened. The process of demarcation of the boundaries during the violent incidents will be the main focus of the following chapters. The next chapter will deal with the movement leaders' basic claims and the texts on violence.